

# THE INVESTIGATORS in

## THE SECRET OF THE VENTRILOQUIST





in

**THE SECRET  
OF THE  
VENTRILOQUIST**

Patricia Osborne has problems with a certain Mr Giggles in her house. He gives her sleepless nights because, instead of sitting still in his armchair, he wanders around the house by himself. Is this a case of disturbing the peace? That doesn't sound like a job for The Three Investigators. However, when Jupiter, Pete and Bob find out that Mr Giggles is a ventriloquist's dummy, they are eager to take on the case. As for Patricia Osborne, it is clear to her that Mr Giggles is possessed by the ghost of the late ventriloquist!

The Three Investigators  
in  
The Secret of the Ventriloquist

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## 1. A Magic Ritual

It was pitch dark on the country road. The moon had not yet risen and there were no street lights. The bicycle lights shining on the cracked road surface were the only sources of light for far and wide. And the whirring of the chains was the only sound as The Three Investigators cycled side by side through Tuna Canyon Park.

“Okay, Jupe,” said Pete Crenshaw. “Now you can really start telling us why we are cycling through the mountains in the middle of the night.”

“It’s just eight o’clock,” replied his friend Jupiter Jones.

“Yes, but it’s as dark as the witching hour,” Pete countered.

“That’s not my fault.”

“No, but what’s the rush?” Pete argued. “I didn’t even get to shower after training because I was supposed to meet you right away.”

Their friend, Bob Andrews nodded. “Look! I’m still lugging my school stuff around because I’ve been out all day.” He tapped his backpack, which hung heavy and warm on his back and was beginning to annoy him. “So Jupe, what’s the idea?”

“I just don’t want to show up too late at Patricia Osborne’s place,” Jupiter said, a little short of breath because the route was slightly uphill. “Okay, she doesn’t know we’re coming, and for an unannounced visit, eight o’clock is almost too late for my liking.”

“All right, but what is it all about?” asked Bob.

“I told you that already. Allie Jamison called me this afternoon and told me that her aunt Pat has a problem of a very specific nature and she may need the help of an experienced and clever investigation team.”

“Well, first of all, I’m very surprised that you spoke to Allie at all,” Pete said. “I thought you hated her.”

“I don’t hate her. She just gets on my nerves, but the cases she has given us in the past have been consistently interesting challenges, so I’ve been able to overlook that.”

The Second Investigator continued: “Secondly, why isn’t she here? She’s never left our side when she hired us previously.”

“As you already know, she attends a boarding school, and she couldn’t just leave as and when she wants.”

“Thirdly, Aunt Pat? Really? The loopy weirdo who joins a new obscure cult fellowship every eight weeks, and who prefers to use a divining rod to direct her right or left instead of looking at a map?”

Jupiter grinned. “The very one.”

“But why are we going to Tuna Canyon Park?” asked Bob. “I thought Aunt Pat lives with her friend Sunshine in that crazy old house at the beach.”

“Not any more,” Jupiter explained. “Someone must have sensed some very negative energy fields in that house. After that, everyone moved out.”

Pete was stunned. “Seriously?”

“No, that was a joke... or maybe not—who knows for sure with Aunt Pat. I have no idea why she doesn’t live there anymore. Anyway, she’s currently having problems with a certain Mr Giggles.”

“Mr Giggles? What kind of name is that?” Pete wondered. “And why? Is his aura the wrong colour?”

“He wanders around the house.”

The Second Investigator waited for more to come, but Jupiter remained silent.

“He wanders around the house? That’s it?”

“Yes.”

“And this is a case for The Three Investigators?”

“Yes, because Mr Giggles is a puppet—a ventriloquist’s dummy, to be precise.”

“Oh,” said Pete.

“I haven’t had much time to find out, so all I know is that the puppet belonged to the gifted ventriloquist Frank Corman, the host of *The Frank and Giggles Show*. This used to be a famous television programme where guest stars appeared weekly and Frank Corman and his puppet would joke around with them. It was ages ago, though.”

Bob nodded. “I don’t know the show, but Frank Corman died recently. There was something about him and his show in the papers.”

“And this doll... wanders around in Aunt Pat’s house?” asked Pete.

“At least that’s what Allie says. Her aunt had been acting very strangely lately, and she was scared and confused. When Allie confronted her, she came out with the story that Mr Giggles was haunting her house.”

“And then, of course, it was all over you,” Bob said. “Allie and Aunt Pat or not—you can’t possibly miss this mystery.”

“Do you?”

“I’m not going to say anything,” Pete muttered, feeling uneasy. He was not particularly fond of cases where dolls were wandering around by themselves.

Ahead of them, a faint light shimmered through the trees along the path. As they came closer, they recognized the silhouette of a small wooden house in front of a flickering light source. It looked as if someone had lit a campfire behind the building.

“That must be it,” Jupiter said, stopping at a mailbox mounted on a pillar at the side of the road. The metal tube was decorated with squiggly letters: ‘Spirit Grove’, it said.

“The name of the house,” the First Investigator explained. “That’s what Allie told me.”

There were four vehicles in front of the house, including an old, brightly painted van. The boys parked their bikes in a free space. Bob was glad to finally be able to take off his backpack. He felt that this area was so obscure that no one would steal his heavy backpack, so he left it next to his bike.

As he did so, his eyes fell on a white stripe about the width of his thumb that ran across the ground at right angles to his feet and was lost in the darkness.

“Look!” Bob knelt down and stroked his fingers across the stripe. He then rubbed his thumb and forefinger together, smelled it and finally carefully held the tip of his tongue against his fingertip. “Salt.”

“Looks like the line encircles the whole house,” Jupiter said. “A salt circle.”

“Why is someone sprinkling salt on the ground?” asked Pete uncomprehendingly.

“It’s a common way in occult circles to keep evil spirits away,” Bob explained.

“Well, that’s off to a good start,” muttered the Second Investigator.

They carefully stepped over the salt and climbed the three creaking steps to the front door. Jupe knocked on the door a few times, but no one responded.

“There is definitely someone at home,” Pete said, looking at the vehicles.

“Probably in the garden by the fire,” Bob guessed. “Come on, we’ll go round the back.”



There was no fence, wall or hedge anywhere. Spirit Grove was half in the wilderness. Therefore, it was no problem to walk around the house.

The flickering campfire came into view—and immediately The Three Investigators stood rooted to the spot. By the fire were four figures in long red robes with large hoods. They stood with their backs to the house and looked towards the edge of the forest. With their right hands they drew strange signs in the air. As they did so, they spoke words together in a strange language, as if in prayer: “*Ateh... Malkuth... Ve Geburah...*”

“What’s going on here?” Pete asked quietly and pressed himself against the wall of the house. Jupiter and Bob did the same.

“Looks like a necromancy,” Bob murmured.

“Look!” Excited, Pete jabbed his elbow into the First Investigator’s ribs. “There’s a doll sitting there!”

The doll was about three-quarters of a metre tall, wore a dark brown suit and had strictly combed-back hair. With its legs stretched out, it sat on a mighty stone and stared into the fire. In the flickering light of the flames, it almost looked as if its glass eyes were alive.

“Is this that Mr Giggles?” whispered Bob.

“I think so,” Jupe murmured. “I saw a picture of it on the Internet.”

One of the red-robed figures, obviously a man, performed one last grand gesture, turned to the others and said: “Let us begin!”

They broke up their circle by the fire and now grouped around the doll. Their faces were in the shadows of the hoods. The man lifted the doll, clutched it by the head with his fingers and held it away from him.

“Be gone, dark powers!” His voice echoed loud and commanding through the canyon. “Give way and return to your realm!” Then he set the doll down again.

Now those present turned one after the other in the four cardinal directions, spoke strange words again and drew signs in the air with their index fingers. As they turned towards the house, The Three Investigators ducked into the shadows to avoid being seen.

“A pentagram,” Jupiter whispered as he recognized the air sign. “A five-pointed star... that’s a well-known magic sign that—”

“Shut up, Jupe!” hissed Pete, who feared they could be heard.

The four figures spread their arms. Wind came up and billowed the red robes. Pete shivered.

“Before me—Raphael!” the group shouted in chorus. “Behind me—Gabriel! On my right hand—Michael! On my left hand—Auriel! For about me flames the Pentagram! ...”

Suddenly and as if by magic, the doll’s mouth opened. The capes fluttered in the wind. One of them got caught in the flames—and started to burn! But since the four people were standing facing away from the campfire, none of them noticed.

The flames slowly licked up the fabric...

## 2. The Wrath of Osiris

Pete did not hesitate for a second. He stormed out from behind the corner of the house towards the group and shouted: "Fire!"

Someone screamed and turned around. Everyone saw what had happened. By then the Second Investigator was already at the burning robe and tore it off the wearer. The flames scorched his forearm before he could throw the robe to the ground and stomped on it.

When the fabric was only smoking, Pete breathed a sigh of relief. He turned to the woman he had saved from the fire. She was now wearing only a flimsy beige T-shirt and shorts, but was far too frightened to care. Pete winced when he realized who he was looking at.

"Aunt Pat!" he gasped. "I mean... Miss Osborne! For goodness' sake!"

Patricia Osborne looked at him as if he had come straight out of Wonderland with Alice. Her hair was dyed a delicate shade of lavender. "Where did you come from all of a sudden?"

"I... I... uh..."

"Don't we know each other?"

"Patricia!" the man with the commanding voice shouted angrily. He took off his hood. Pale blue eyes sparkled at Pete. "What's going on here? Who is this brat? Why is he here?"

Now Bob and Jupiter also came running. The First Investigator had found a long cardigan on a chair at the verandah and had the presence of mind to bring it with him. He handed it wordlessly to Patricia Osborne, who gratefully put the cardigan on while she eyed the three of them.

"Wait a minute... yes, I know you three! I've seen you before... where was it?"

"At your sister's house," Jupiter reminded her. "It was some time ago. We are The Three Investigators and we uncovered the sinister machinations of your house guest, Mr Ariel. I'm Jupiter Jones."

"Jupiter Jones! Why, you're Baby Fatso!" Aunt Pat exclaimed.

She was referring to Jupiter's past as a child actor playing the character of 'Baby Fatso' in a very popular children's television series. However, the name annoyed Jupe to this day, so he chose not to acknowledge it, instead he held out his hand to Aunt Pat, which she took limply and shook. "And this is Pete Crenshaw and Bob Andrews," Jupe continued.

"Yes, right! Well, what a coincidence that we meet here again today!" said Aunt Pat in the dreamy and slightly absent tone that The Three Investigators already knew. "And at exactly the right moment! That could have gone badly with the fire. But what are you doing here?"

"I'd like to know that too," said the second woman in the group grimly, crossing her arms which made her gold bracelets jingled on her wrists. She was a slender woman with greyish blonde hair. It was Sunshine, Aunt Pat's friend. The Three Investigators did not know her, but had once met her twin sister Amanda.

"They have been watching us secretly," the leader said angrily. "I demand an explanation!"

"That's true, sir," Jupiter admitted. "We have been watching you, but that was not our intention. We are here because Miss Osborne's niece Allie asked us to pay her aunt a visit.

No one answered our knock, so we came here to the back of the garden where we had seen the fire from the road. We didn't want to disturb you in your... ritual. So we waited."

"What luck!" thought Aunt Pat. "Fate has brought us together. How kind of Allie to send you to me, really! But she worries too much about me, it's not like I'm a lonely old woman to be looked after. I've got lots of friends! Oh, I haven't even introduced you to them yet, how rude!" She turned to her three companions. "This is my friend Sunshine... and this is our housemate Vandaan." She pointed to the fourth in the group, a short man with fair skin and a round face. He hadn't said a word yet, but just watched everything with his small eyes. On his head, he had only a few short reddish-blond hairs and hardly any eyebrows on his face. When he nodded to The Three Investigators, he did not make a face.

Finally, Aunt Pat turned to the leader of the ritual. "And this is—"

"Are you serious now, Patricia?" he interrupted her angrily. "Are we having a coffee party here? These louts have disturbed our ritual! My connection to the cosmic forces has been severed. I don't think I'll be able to re-establish it today."

"Oh, Osiris!" she said regretfully. "Really? That's too silly. Anyway, at least the boys saved me from the fire!"

"It is dangerous to break off a ritual, dear Patricia. There can be serious consequences if you do not release the powers you have invoked back into their dimension."

"Oh, you're absolutely right, of course, Osiris, please forgive me." She turned to The Three Investigators. "Osiris knows about these things, you see, he is a shaman. Yes, what are we going to do now, Osiris?"

"I can only try to re-establish the connection, but certainly not in the presence of these three brats!"

Jupiter had little desire to offer a stage to a man who called himself Osiris, and he wasn't planning to leave the field for a second. So he simply ignored the man and pointed to the reason for their visit—the ventriloquist's dummy. "Well, well, Mr Giggles is here too!"

"Yes, that's right!" said Aunt Pat in surprise, and she was instantly distracted from the subject. "You know him? Oh, surely Allie told you about him. Isn't he great?"

"I find it rather creepy," murmured Pete, who was uneasy about the doll. Of course, it was only an inanimate object as he was aware of that. However, as the doll sat there, grinning and staring into the fire, it looked as if it understood exactly every word that was spoken.

"And that brings us to the subject," Jupiter gratefully picked up the thread. "Allie told us that the doll was causing you problems, Miss Osborne. She is concerned and asked us to come here and investigate the matter if necessary."

"Investigate?" asked Aunt Pat in amazement, "but there's nothing to investigate."

"No? Allie said the doll gave you sleepless nights."

Aunt Pat laughed nervously. "That's true... but Mr Giggles is merely charged with negative energies. That's why we did the ritual after all. It was a protective and banishing ritual to break the dark influence."

"We didn't complete the ritual, Patricia!" Osiris spoke up again and scowled. "We stopped it in the middle! And we might as well leave it at that now!" Angrily, he tore off his robe and threw it to the ground. "I've had it. I was trying to do you a favour, Patricia, but apparently you'd rather deal with these three runaway brats who don't take our sacred rituals seriously. I must say, I had understood you differently." He turned to go.

"But no, Osiris, wait!" cried Aunt Pat. "That was just an accident! These three are really quite nice boys! They have—"

"I'm not interested in that. I'm leaving. Don't expect me to help you again without anything in return!" With that, the man stomped off in a huff. A little later they heard a car

driving away.

“Quite quick-tempered, the good fellow,” Bob muttered.

“Oh no, Sunshine, what are we going to do?” asked Aunt Pat, unsettled. “The powers we have conjured up...”

“I don’t think it’s as bad as Osiris says,” Sunshine tried to reassure her friend. “It looked more like wounded vanity to me.”

The words did not seem to reach Aunt Pat. “I’m sure he could have helped us... but now we’ve upset him. Such a stupid thing!”

Vandaan, who had said nothing so far, cleared his throat. “I... could imagine that we could continue without Osiris, Patricia,” he said with a voice that was irritatingly high-pitched. “If we finish the ritual—”

“No, no,” she immediately defended herself. “The connection is broken, I can feel it very clearly. Osiris was right.”

“Good,” Vandaan murmured. “Then I will retire now. You’ll want to take care of your guests.”

“Yes, yes,” Aunt Pat said absently, not even looking at Vandaan. The little man left the group quietly like a shadow and went into the house.

“I’m sorry we barged in here so unannounced,” Jupiter apologized, relaxing a little now that Osiris was gone. “We should have called.”

“But then you couldn’t have saved me from the fire. I tell you, it was fate. Do not blame yourselves,” she said and then turned to Sunshine. “So Sunshine, we should make another attempt to banish the dark forces soon. Now Mr Giggles has even tried to set me on fire! This is getting too dangerous!”

“Tried to set you on fire?” repeated Bob. “You think the doll caused your robe to catch fire?”

“Yes, of course! The dark forces within him have resisted the power of light that we have invoked.”

“Well...” Bob said, “it looked to me that the wind had blown your robe too close to the flames.”

Now Pete cleared his throat. “I saw it too, Bob. It was the wind for sure. However, when the gust came up, the doll opened its mouth. It... it looked like it had something to do with it—like it was laughing!”

### 3. The Possessed Doll

Ten minutes later, The Three Investigators, Patricia Osborne and Sunshine sat by candlelight on the verandah, from whose canopy dangled all kinds of wooden and crystal jewellery, to talk calmly about what had happened.

On the Hollywood swing, Mr Giggles sat there like a gleeful child. Just as Pete was looking furtively once more, Mr Giggles dropped his nutcracker mouth open.

“You see, Pete,” said Jupiter. “The mouth opens all by itself. Mr Giggles has... a loose mouth, so to speak.”

The Second Investigator was not convinced. “Of all things, the second the gust of wind blows Miss Osborne’s robe to the fire?”

“Just because of the gust of wind, Pete,” Jupe said and pushed the doll’s lower jaw upwards. Then he gave the Hollywood swing a very slight push—and the jaw dropped down again.

“All right,” Pete murmured. “Maybe so. But we’re not here for a loose doll’s mouth, are we?”

“No,” Jupiter agreed with him and turned to Aunt Pat. “Why are we here, Miss Osborne?”

“Well, I don’t know. Little Allie is just exaggerating. Yes, I’ve been a bit unbalanced lately, I admit, but now I’m doing something about the dark energies!”

“Maybe you could just tell us what this doll is all about, Miss Osborne,” Bob suggested. “Then we’ll see whether little Allie was exaggerating or not.”

“Yes, if you say so...” said Aunt Pat, sighing and running her hand through her lavender-coloured hair. “I was lucky enough to acquire Mr Giggles cheaply three weeks ago. I used to love *The Frank and Giggles Show* as a child! I was quite shocked when I heard the news of Frank Corman’s death. All right, he was not exactly young, but still... he was such a talented man! The way he lent his voice to the puppet... you always thought Mr Giggles was really alive!”

The Three Investigators knew that Patricia Osborne was a passionate collector of all kinds of things that had once belonged to movie stars or had been used by them in famous movies. She owned ball gowns of great Hollywood divas, the false eyelashes of Rita Hayworth, a sword of Errol Flynn and even one of the hats Harrison Ford had worn as Indiana Jones. Such things could often be bought at auctions. Patricia Osborne, although not particularly wealthy, had already invested a small fortune in her passion.

“Was the doll auctioned off?” enquired Bob.

“Excuse me?” Aunt Pat’s mind had apparently drifted again. “Yes, auctioned off, of course—for a good cause. Mr Giggles has been with me ever since. I put him in that lovely old armchair that Marlon Brando sat in in *The Godfather*—upstairs in my collection room. However, one day... he wasn’t sitting there anymore, but went behind the arm of the chair. It looked as if he had crawled there! At first I thought he had just fallen off, but a day later, it happened again. This time Mr Giggles had opened the window, sat on the window sill and looked out. And so it went on, every day he was somewhere else.”

“Just a moment,” Pete said, eyeing Mr Giggles suspiciously. “Are you saying the doll wandered around on its own?”

“No.” She smiled indulgently. “Mr Giggles is just a doll! He’s probably possessed by evil spirits... by dark forces. That sort of thing happens sometimes. It’s nobody’s fault. You just have to make sure you get rid of them.”

“And to that end you performed a ritual tonight,” Bob surmised.

“That’s right. You’ll see, very soon Mr Giggles will be back to his old self. I’m touched that Allie is worried, but I’m handling it quite well myself.”

The Three Investigators gave each other questioning looks. To none of them did this story offer a reasonable explanation for what had happened, but they were also somewhat at a loss as to how to react.

Then Sunshine, who had only been listening so far, spoke up: “You’re keeping half of it from the boys, Patricia! I don’t think that’s right. They came all the way here to help you. They should know the whole truth.”

“But I’m not hiding anything! That’s all that happened!”

“You told me you heard the doll giggling too!”

“Oh yes, that one time...” Aunt Pat murmured absent-mindedly. “That was at night. The giggling came from my collection room... but maybe I just imagined it.”

“And what about your fear? You haven’t slept a wink since that doll came into the house.”

“Oh, now you’re exaggerating, my dear,” Aunt Pat tried to play it down.

“I didn’t,” Sunshine replied.

“I am sensitive to the presence of spiritual beings,” Aunt Pat continued. “That has always been the case. That’s why I don’t sleep well... but we are doing something about it now. Investigators can’t help us with that.”

Jupiter cleared his throat audibly. “I take a different view of the matter. As in many of our previous cases, we have uncovered that supposedly supernatural phenomena always has a very natural origin. I do not believe that this ventriloquist’s dummy is possessed by evil forces, but that a human being makes it look that way. That’s how it was with Mr Ariel, remember?”

“Mr Ariel was a fraud,” Aunt Pat admitted. “A very bad fellow, I told you about him, Sunshine, didn’t I? He was only pretending to be a spiritual person. However, this case is different. Mr Giggles is not a person, but an object possessed by a spiritual being... and that can’t be a fraud, can it?”

Jupiter slowly realized that he wasn’t getting very far with Aunt Pat with his arguments. He took a deep breath and tried another way: “Let me ask you a simple question, Miss Osborne... if the doll is possessed—why don’t you just get rid of it?”

Aunt Pat laughed. “But that’s Mr Giggles!” she declared. “The Mr Giggles! One of my most prized possessions! He’s one of a kind! I just can’t give him away!”

“You could sell it to another collector,” Pete suggested.

“But why should I do that?” asked Aunt Pat uncomprehendingly. “I want to keep him after all!”

Jupiter sighed. “All right. Let’s get back to the fraud theory. I didn’t mean, of course, that Mr Giggles is a fraud, but that a person is creating the haunting using the doll.”

“But no, I can’t imagine that. It would have to be someone who has access to the house... and why would anyone do that at all?”

“There are all sorts of possibilities,” said the First Investigator. “Someone could want to frighten you... to drive you away... to get revenge for something... to get you to do

something specific.”

“No,” said Aunt Pat in a way that made Jupiter doubt that she had been listening properly at all. “No, none of that makes any sense. Who could it be?”

“Well...” Jupe began.

“I think it’s very nice that you care,” Aunt Pat interrupted, “but I really don’t need your services.”

“But I do,” Sunshine said, looking challengingly at her housemate. “After all, this matter concerns me too as I live under the same roof as you with this doll. And if it were up to me, we would have got rid of this thing long ago. I’m with Pete on this one. I find the doll creepy, but it’s yours, I get it. At least let the boys find out what is going on here.”

“But I thought we were of one mind about the spiritual beings? You were also in favour of asking Osiris for help.”

“Yes,” Sunshine admitted, “but it could also be that the three boys are right that it is not a spiritual being at all. I’ll make you a deal, Patricia. We try it our way and the three boys try it theirs. What do you say?”

“Well,” murmured Aunt Pat, lost in thought, “but what do I have to do then?”

“First of all, it would be enough if you answered a few questions for us,” Jupiter said. “When exactly did it start that Mr Giggles seemed to wander around?”

“Hmm... let me think... I bought him at the auction two and a half weeks ago... and the first time he moved by himself was... uh... a week ago.”

“And at what time of the day did the incidents occur?” Jupiter continued probing. “Did you perhaps always find Mr Giggles in a different place in the morning after getting up?”

“No, it was very different. At night, during the day...”

“But you never saw the doll move by itself, did you?”

Aunt Pat seemed to have to think about it for a moment. “No, I’ve never seen that.”

“And you?” Jupiter turned to Sunshine.

“Me neither.”

“Was there anyone in the house who could have shifted the doll somewhere else? Your housemate, for example?”

“I don’t really remember,” said Aunt Pat. “I never thought about it.”

“I’m in Los Angeles during the day giving medicinal herb seminars,” Sunshine said in a matter-of-fact manner, “and Vandaan often works at a vegan supermarket in Malibu.”

“But not always?”

“Half days. Most of the time it was that one of us came home and Patricia told us about Mr Giggles’s change of location... but not always. Three days ago, we were sitting together at dinner and when Vandaan went to the bathroom, suddenly the doll was sitting there.”

“And before that he was in my collection room!” confirmed Aunt Pat.

“Can anyone get into this room?”

“No! It’s always locked because I keep my most valuable items there. Only I have the key. Even the window has bars.”

“Does anyone else have access to the house besides you three? Friends? Family? A cleaning lady, perhaps?”

Miss Osborne shook her head and began to massage her temples. “Oh, all these questions you ask me! It wears me out... the mental strain... Such an invocation always robs me of all my strength...”

“Two more questions, Miss Osborne,” Jupiter asked. “Can you think of any person who is not well-disposed towards you?”

“You know, Jupiter, after the story with Mr Ariel, I decided to surround myself only with positive-minded people.”

“All right. Then my last question—how do you know Osiris?”

“What do you mean?”

“I just want to know how you know him.”

“We met a few days ago at a workshop at the Shakti Centre in Santa Monica. Healing meditation. We were all there together—Sunshine, Vandaan and me. During a break we were talking about the problems Mr Giggles was giving me, and this was overheard by Osiris, who was also one of the course participant. He explained that he had shamanic training and immediately offered to help.”

“And what does he want in return?” Jupiter enquired.

“Nothing at all,” Aunt Pat replied, astonished and slightly piqued. “It’s not like Mr Ariel, Jupiter. You don’t think I’ve learned anything, do you? But it’s not like that. Osiris is a perfectly decent young man, so you don’t need to suspect him at all. Anyway, I’ve now had enough of your questions. I’m tired and want to go to bed.”

“All right,” Jupiter relented, not wanting to upset Aunt Pat any further. He reached into his pocket and handed her one of their business cards. It said:



“Perhaps you would like to contact us if you think of anything else,” Jupiter suggested. “We—”

The rumbling of footsteps in the house interrupted the First Investigator. The door to the verandah was pulled open. Vandaan stood before them. His face was pale with horror.

“Patricia! Sunshine!”

“What’s wrong?” asked Sunshine.

“In... in the kitchen...” stammered Vandaan. “Come quickly!”



#### 4. The Ghost of the Ventriloquist

The Three Investigators, Sunshine, Aunt Pat and Vandaan stood thunderstruck at the entrance to the kitchen, staring at the opposite wall. The haste Vandaan had urged had been unnecessary. What there was to see did not run away or evaporate.

But that did not make it any less frightening.

The wall above the dining table was smeared. In large, red letters, it said:

*YOU CAN'T GET RID OF ME LIKE THAT!*

*F.C.*

"Is that... blood?" asked Pete, moving closer. He slapped his hands in front of his mouth. "For goodness' sake, it is blood!"

The First Investigator switched on all the lights to inspect the writing as closely as possible. "Blood, indeed."

"Jupe, get away from there!"

"Blood can't hurt you, Pete, it doesn't scratch or bite, and it probably didn't come from a human being either. Miss Osborne, do you happen to have any raw meat in the house that could have served as a source for this writing?"

"N-no," stammered Aunt Pat, her previous composure visibly crumbling. She was trembling and fighting tears.

"Mr Vandaan—"

"Just Vandaan, please," the small, hairless man corrected without looking at Jupiter.

"Vandaan, you came into the house twenty minutes ago," Jupiter noted. "Why didn't you let us know until now?"

"I didn't go straight into the kitchen, but upstairs to my room. Just then I came back down to get a glass of orange juice. Only then did I see the writing."

"Apart from that, did you see or hear anything unusual?"

"No. I heard you talking to each other from my room above the verandah. That was all."

Now Aunt Pat began to sob. "This... this is terrible! I won't sleep a wink all night again!"

Sunshine took her friend in her arms and tried to calm her down.

"That's definitely a step up from just putting a doll in a different place," Pete said, and he shuddered.

"You can't get rid of me like that," Bob read aloud and took some photos of the bloody message. "What is this referring to? Does it refer to the ritual you performed?"

Jupiter nodded. "Someone wants to make it clear that this cannot be dealt with by magical rituals... someone... not Mr Giggles, though... otherwise the message would have been signed with a 'G.' or 'Mr G.'... but it says 'F.C.' Am I the only one to whom these initials look familiar?"

Bob frowned for a moment, then it dawned on him. "Why yes, Jupe! 'F.C.' as in Frank Corman!"

"The ventriloquist Frank Corman?" asked Pete. "The creator of Mr Giggles?"

“Oh goodness, you’re right!” cried Sunshine. “That’s the way it has to be! It’s not just evil forces that have gone into Mr Giggles! It’s Frank Corman’s ghost!”

Patricia Osborne gasped in shock. Then she fainted.

“A ghost of a ventriloquist in a possessed doll,” Pete said tonelessly. “Great. Right up my alley. This has to be my favourite case.”

The Three Investigators were on their way back to Rocky Beach. Aunt Pat had fortunately only fainted for a few seconds. With their combined efforts, they had hoisted her onto the living room sofa, but a reasonable conversation with her had not been possible afterwards.

A cursory search for clues had also yielded no results. In order not to upset the completely frightened woman any further, the boys had finally wiped the blood writing off the tiles and then said goodbye.

While they were now cycling back, they discussed the incidents of the evening. As there was no traffic at all on the lonely canyon road at this hour, they could comfortably ride side by side.

“Aunt Pat is unbelievable,” Bob said. “She really hasn’t learned a thing since the case with Ariel... and her crazy housemates are just the same as she is. What do you think—could it be that she has blown a fuse and is making this stuff up?”

Jupiter shook his head. “Patricia Osborne lives in her own world, I agree. Although she is a bit cranky, I don’t think she is prone to delusions and she doesn’t make up fairy tales. If she says there’s a doll wandering around her house, then we have to assume that’s true for now.” Jupe turned to Pete. “Of course that doesn’t mean that we are truly dealing with the ghost of a ventriloquist in a possessed doll, Pete. I hope you realize that.”

“Yes, I do,” Pete replied, annoyed. “After all, there are no ghosts. You two have explained that to me often enough.”

“Maybe not real ghosts,” said Bob, “but the thought that ‘F.C.’ could stand for Frank Corman is nevertheless obvious. That would also make sense of the message: ‘You can’t get rid of me like that’. It means that Aunt Pat cannot drive the ghost out of the doll using that ritual. Also, she is not dealing with dark forces in general, but very specifically with the ghost of the ventriloquist.”

Jupiter nodded. “Then the question is—what does Frank Corman’s ghost want? Why is he haunting Mr Giggles?”

“Wait a minute,” Pete intervened. “If you say that there are no ghosts... then what now?”

“I am of the opinion that there is someone who pretends to be a ghost here,” Jupiter continued, “and he wants to achieve something. Only what? He has made it known that he will not be driven away. And his message was directed at not several people, but just one person—specifically Aunt Pat, we may assume, since she is the owner of the doll. He wants something from her.”

“Yet she of all people is the one pretending that there is no problem at all,” Bob remarked. “If it hadn’t been for her friend Sunshine, she would have dumped us instead of putting us on the case... at least before she saw the bloody message. Only then did she lose her composure.”

“Understandable,” Pete thought. “I’d go crazy if someone smeared blood all over my wall, but luckily we already have a pretty suspicious person.”

Jupiter turned to the Second Investigator with interest. “I can already guess what’s coming now. Nevertheless, I’d like to hear it from you. Who do you think is ‘pretty

suspicious’?”

“Well, Vandaan of course.”

“And what facts support your assumption?” asked Jupiter.

“It’s obvious. That guy hardly said anything, ducked around and went into the house pretty quickly. He must have had twenty minutes to smear the blood writing on the wall. Besides, he works part-time. That leaves plenty of time to carry Mr Giggles from one place to another... and he was acting all weird.”

“In what way?” Jupiter enquired.

“He never really looked you in the eye. Didn’t you notice that?”

“Yes, I did, but I took it as a sign of insecurity towards strangers—not suspicious behaviour. Also the fact that he would have had enough time to commit the acts does not mean that he did them. That being said... what would be his motive?”

“I don’t know. Maybe Aunt Pat is bugging him and he wants her out of the house. Maybe she has a better room.” Pete realized himself that his explanations were more than meagre.

“Oh, I don’t know, Jupe. I just thought he was weird.”

“I also found him strange. He is by no means dismissed from the circle of suspects, but I would like to point out to you that the nature of the blood writing can lead to other conclusions.”

“I know what you mean, Jupe,” Bob interjected. “The blood was almost dried. I noticed that when I took the photos. I don’t think twenty minutes is enough time to let blood dry on tiles.”

“That would mean that someone had already written the message on the wall beforehand while the others were busy with their ritual outside!” Pete said.

“Exactly, Pete. It is possible that the perpetrator was already there when we arrived. Unfortunately, we can’t turn back time to check that.”

They reached the end of the canyon and the outskirts of Rocky Beach. A wide road crossed their path. From here on there were lights again. They let a few cars pass before continuing straight ahead.

“How do we proceed now?” asked Pete.

“The first thing we need is an information base.”

“I’ll take care of the information,” Bob announced. “I suppose we want to know all about Mr Giggles and Frank Corman?”

The First Investigator nodded. “And if it’s possible, also about Vandaan. Unfortunately, we neglected to ask for his real or full name. The same goes for Osiris. We should keep an eye on him too, after all he would be a beneficiary of the situation. If not for the haunted puppet, Aunt Pat would not have used his services.”

“Which he offered for free, though,” Bob reminded. “I’ll see if I can find out anything about him anyway... So, what will you be doing?”

“I will draw up a plan to monitor Spirit Grove. If we manage to catch the perpetrator in the act, the case would be solved quickly.”

They reached the intersection where they would part ways and stopped briefly to make an appointment for the next day.

Out of the corner of his eye, Bob noticed a light and turned around. “Strange...” he murmured.

“What?”

“Over there.”

As Pete and Jupiter turned around, two lights went out.

“There’s a car with those weird square headlights. Now the driver has turned them off... but I’m pretty sure I saw the headlights earlier on the main road too.”

Pete tried to make out the car in the dark, but it was too far away. “You mean he’s been following us since the intersection?”

“Possibly. I’m not quite sure.”

“If it is, we shouldn’t necessarily let it be known that we’ve noticed,” Jupiter advised, and Bob and Pete quickly looked straight ahead again. “We’ll part ways here anyway. Let’s just keep our eyes peeled and meet at Headquarters tomorrow after school, all right?”

His two friends nodded and turned left, while Jupiter went right. He cycled to The Jones Salvage Yard. At Red Gate Rover, one of their secret entrances in the fence that enclosed the salvage yard, he kept a lookout for a few moments for the car that Bob thought he had noticed, but there was nothing suspicious to be seen on the road. Shrugging, Jupiter opened the secret door and pushed his bike through.

It was already late and it would have been better to go straight to bed. However, Jupiter was too curious. Instead of going to the Jones family home situated next to the salvage yard, he turned to an old refrigerator that was leaning, as if by chance, against a mountain of scrap metal. This was the Cold Gate. He opened the fridge door and climbed through. There, he operated a secret mechanism and the back wall swung open. Behind it, completely buried under scrap metal, was a short dark tunnel of corrugated sheet metal that led to another door—the door of an old mobile home trailer which had been restructured into Headquarters, the office of The Three Investigators.

Jupiter settled down at the desk and switched on the computer. He wanted to take a quick look at some pictures and videos of Frank Corman and Mr Giggles. Then he would have something to think about while going to sleep later. He quickly skimmed the first hits.

Frank Corman had been a real gentleman in front of the camera—always dressed in a black suit, with his impeccably coiffed hair and beaming smile. There were numerous photos of him posing with Mr Giggles, often alongside the star guests on his show.

Jupiter clicked on a video of *The Frank and Giggles Show*. In the opening credits, the ventriloquist and his puppet appeared as cartoon characters clowning around to an overwrought tune. At the end, a chorus sang loudly: ‘The Frank and Giggles Shooooooooow!’

Frank Corman then faded in on a sparsely furnished stage as the audience clapped. Corman sat on a bar stool and perched on his bent leg was Mr Giggles. The host smiled at the camera and started to say something, but the doll was quick to interrupt.

“Hello, it’s Mr Giggles again!” came a typical ventriloquist’s voice, slightly squashed and a little slurred. “And this is my partner Frank! Welcome to ‘The Giggles and Frank Show’, hee hee hee!”

“Wait a minute,” Frank said irritably. “It’s called *The Frank and Giggles Show*. This is my show... and you’re my partner, not the other way around.”

Mr Giggles looked at Frank in surprise and then turned his head to look at Frank’s back where, of course, the ventriloquist’s arm was when playing the puppet. Mr Giggles looked up again and giggled. The eyebrows, eyelids and eyeballs were movable, giving the puppet an amazing range of facial expressions.

“Oh, Frank, you don’t really think they would give a show to someone who keeps grabbing other people’s butts?”

The audience laughed.

The humour was a bit outdated, but Jupiter was fascinated by the perfection with which Frank Corman had mastered ventriloquism. The movement of his larynx was barely

noticeable, if at all, and Corman also mastered puppetry so well that after just a few seconds, the audience could forget that Mr Giggles was not a real person.

Fascinated, Jupiter studied the doll's movements when his attention was suddenly diverted. He had heard a sound—the familiar creaking of Red Gate Rover!

## 5. Greetings from Mr Giggles

The First Investigator turned down the sound on the computer and listened. Someone was walking around outside. Shortly afterwards the Cold Gate was opened!

Jupiter jumped from the chair, grabbed a baseball bat that was leaning next to the table, stood behind the trailer door and prepared to take a swing.

Suddenly, the door to Headquarters swung open.

“Well, Jupe isn’t here at all. I could have bet that he’d be here checking stuff online. I wonder if he’s really in bed already?”

“Nah, look, the computer’s on!”

Jupiter breathed an inward sigh of relief and lowered the baseball bat. Then he shouted: “Boo!”

Pete and Bob turned together, startled.

“Man, Jupe, what are you doing!” cried Pete. “Why are you hiding behind the door? And why do you have that baseball bat in your hand?”

“This was the first thing that I grabbed,” Jupe defended himself. “I thought you were intruders. We have a meeting tomorrow, not tonight, remember?”

“Very funny.”

“We are here because there are news,” Bob explained.

“News in such a short time? Let me guess—the pursuer has reappeared!”

“Wrong. We didn’t see the car anymore... but I found something. We arrived at my house and I was rummaging in my backpack for the key, when suddenly I found something else.” Bob held up a round, shiny object.

“A CD?” Jupiter wondered. “And it wasn’t in your backpack earlier?”

“No, definitely not. Look!”

Bob handed him the disc. On the top, someone had drawn a face with a waterproof pen. It wasn’t a work of art, but you could clearly see the bug-eyed, grinning face of Mr Giggles.

“Someone must have put this in my backpack at Spirit Grove.”

“You left the backpack beside your bike, didn’t you?”

Bob nodded. “I didn’t think anyone would take it, let alone put something in it. After all, there was hardly anyone up there in the canyon.”

“Obviously someone slipped you the CD.” Jupiter pinched his lower lip. “It could have been Vandaan or Osiris... or an unknown person who might also have made the blood writing in the kitchen... or someone else entirely. Strictly speaking, it just couldn’t have been Sunshine and Aunt Pat, since we were with them the whole time.”

“Don’t you want to see what’s on it?” asked Pete impatiently.

“Of course I do.”

Jupiter opened the CD drive on the computer and was about to insert the disc when he paused. “Wait! Fingerprints!”

“You’re right, Jupe!” Bob agreed and immediately ran into the crime lab at the back of the trailer where they kept all kinds of detective equipment. He rummaged around for a moment and then returned with the fingerprint powder. “A CD like this is ideal for fingerprints.”

"There are some on it too, I see," Jupiter said as he held the disc at an angle against the light.

"At least some of them are mine," Bob confessed. "I didn't know what was going on when I found the CD in my backpack."

"We'll see."

Bob carefully dusted the CD with a graphite-based powder using an ultra-fine brush. Where the fingers had touched the smooth surface, a thin layer of oily residue had remained, to which the powder adhered. Now they could clearly see the imprints and remove and fix them with an adhesive film. Soon The Three Investigators had secured five different prints. They compared them with their own prints, which they had taken a long time ago for just such purposes.

"That one is mine," Bob quickly stated, "but the other four are not mine."

"Very good," said Jupiter. "Then we already know what we have to do the next time we visit Aunt Pat. Now for the contents of this CD." He wiped the disk clean and put it in the drive.

"A video file," Pete said after the CD had been read in. "Nothing else."

The First Investigator clicked on the file.

The video began with a few erratic camera movements in semi-darkness. Then the picture calmed down and they saw a garden at night in the moonlight. The full moon was in the sky and the light was enough to make out a field and a few trees.

A shadowy figure appeared between the trees. It turned here and there, but it was difficult to tell what it was doing. They couldn't even tell if it was a man or a woman. For a while, the camera followed the figure who did not seem to notice.

Then suddenly a voice rang out: "Hello, it's Mr Giggles again!"

The picture shook as the cameraman flinched in shock and then panned to the right in the direction from which the voice had come.

A large stone came into the picture. It was the mighty stone in the garden of Spirit Grove. On it sat Mr Giggles. He seemed to look over at the figure that was now out of the picture.

Mr Giggles blinked and looked absolutely alive as he dropped his jaw and continued in a bruised and conspiratorially murmuring voice: "But that's not true at all. You see, I only look like Mr Giggles, but I'm really Frank. You think I'm gone forever, but from now on, I'll always be here! I won't rest until the truth comes out, hee hee hee! Until you admit it all! It's Mr Giggles again! I'll be with you forever now! Hee hee hee! Hee hee hee!"

While the doll was talking, the camera had zoomed in on him, trembling. The Three Investigators saw Mr Giggles move his arms... and blink as the moonlight was reflected in his blue glass eyes. Above all, no one was seen moving the doll!

"Jupe!" murmured Pete. "There is no puppeteer! The puppet moves by itself!"

Mr Giggles was still chuckling, holding his stomach.

Then something crackled and rustled, and the figure from the beginning of the video darted across the frame and ran away.

"Hee hee hee! Hee hee hee!" went Mr Giggles, turning his head and looking straight into the camera.

That's when the cameraman also got scared. He jerkily panned into the darkness, then the video ended.

For a few seconds, The Three Investigators stared at the computer monitor in silence.

"That was scary," Bob finally said.

"There was no puppeteer!" repeated Pete. "The puppet was alive! Just like Aunt Pat said!"

Jupiter nodded slowly. He too, found the video eerie, and he had noticed something else. “Just before you came, I was watching a video from *The Frank and Giggles Show*. I may be wrong, but to me, Mr Giggles just sounded exactly the same—that is, just like Frank Corman’s ventriloquist voice.”

Pete felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand up. He struggled to make his voice sound firm. “Then what Sunshine suspected is true... and Mr Giggles has just said it himself—Frank Corman is dead, but his ghost lives on in the doll!”

They watched the video a few more times and tried to find out the secret of the unseen puppeteer.

“Of course, you can digitally edit a video like that and edit out the puppeteer,” Jupiter muttered, “but it just doesn’t look like that. Someone just happened to record this while he was actually filming something completely different.”

Bob nodded. “That’s what I think too. Who made this video? And what did he originally want to film?”

“The figure in the forest... in the forest behind Spirit Grove,” Jupiter answered. “Someone was spying on someone there, and was then startled by Mr Giggles.”

“Either that, or we’re supposed to believe that was what happened,” Bob said.

“A good point, Bob.”

“Hey, guys!” shouted Pete, waving around in front of his friends’ faces. “It doesn’t matter at all who was filming what. There was no puppeteer! That’s what’s so important about this video! Frank Corman’s ghost is walking around! And he’s in that puppet! The video is proof of that! I know, I know, you don’t have to say it—there are no ghosts and so on and so forth, but Jupe, you said yourself that Mr Giggles even speaks with the same voice as before. How do you explain that if Corman is dead after all?”

“I can’t explain for the time being,” Jupiter admitted, “but since there are no possible solutions here, we should devote ourselves to the questions we can answer, for example, when the video was made.”

“How are we supposed to find out?”

“I already know—a week ago.” Jupiter let Pete fidget for a few moments before he followed up with his explanation: “You can clearly see the full moon in the video. Now we have a waning crescent moon. So the last full moon was a week ago.”

“That’s exactly when Aunt Pat said the haunting started,” Bob remarked.

“The day Frank’s ghost went into the doll,” Pete murmured, shuddering. “On a full moon!” However, his friends only shook their heads at this.

“Next question,” Jupe continued unperturbed. “Why did the CD end up in Bob’s backpack?”

“The video is a warning to us,” Bob suggested. “Someone wanted us to know that Mr Giggles is really haunted... so as to get us off the case!”

“Which once again makes the blood writing perpetrator a possibility. Last question—who is the person who fled into the forest? There are at least two people who saw and heard the talking Mr Giggles on the night of the full moon—the person in the video and the person who recorded this. Either neither of them lives in Spirit Grove, or one of the residents is playing a game.”

The thought lingered in the air like a gloomy cloud until Pete said: “I only know one thing—Aunt Pat must never see this video otherwise she’ll faint a second time. She believes



in Frank Corman's ghost anyway, but if she actually saw Mr Giggles haunted, she wouldn't be able to cope."

Jupiter nodded. "We shouldn't tell her about it at the moment... perhaps we don't even have to. We have the fingerprints after all. We just need to find a way to get the prints of the suspects without telling Aunt Pat the whole story. We should also give Mr Giggles a more thorough examination. Maybe that way we'll find out how it was able to move around without a puppeteer. I'm sure we can get to the bottom of this!"

## 6. Mission Fingerprint

The next day, The Three Investigators met again at the salvage yard right after school. Since Bob had completed his classes two hours earlier, he had time to do some research for this case.

“Frank Corman started his career as a ventriloquist in a circus,” Bob reported as they sat with a cold Coke in the open-air workshop. It was too hot in Headquarters in this weather. “He toured the country with the circus for a few years until a tragic accident occurred—the circus tent collapsed in a storm during a performance, and some people were killed. After that, of course, it was over with the circus.

“However, Frank was lucky because he was discovered for television. After a few small appearances were very well-received by the audience, he quickly got his own show. *The Frank and Giggles Show* ran very successfully for twenty years on CBC Studios before Corman stepped down for reasons of age. Even then, he was a frequent guest on other shows with his puppet. His last appearance was in a late-night show not so long ago. Then his health went downhill and just about a month ago, Corman passed away.”

“Any particular incidents surrounding Mr Giggles?” Jupiter asked.

“As far as I’ve seen, none. Mr Giggles is just a puppet—with a rather caustic, even vicious personality at times. Whatever he said or did—” Bob did not finish the sentence and closed his mouth... but a voice that seemed to come out of nowhere continued: “... is, of course, done through ‘Hank’ Corman.”

The voice sounded throaty and bruised and a little slurred. Bob widened his eyes in feigned surprise and turned his head left and right, but Pete and Jupiter had long since seen through him.

“Wow, not bad, Bob!” said Pete. It had been a while since they last witnessed Bob’s ventriloquism skills. That was when he had learned it for a performance at school. After that, he had not pursued it further. “Have you been practising in secret?” Pete asked.

“Last night was the first time in months,” Bob admitted, pursing his lips and continuing in his ventriloquist’s voice: “That went pretty gud... I think.”

“You still have to work on some of the sounds,” Jupiter noted. “And his name is ‘Frank’, not ‘Hank’.”

“I know, but the ‘F’ is difficult... and the ‘P’ too... and the ‘M’. There are a few tricks, but I can’t get them right yet.”

“Keep practising,” Juve encouraged him. “It can’t hurt to know as much as you can about ventriloquism for this case. Did you find out anything else?”

“Yes. I’ve been trying to track down Osiris. It’s a shame we didn’t let Aunt Pat and Sunshine tell us his real name.”

“If they really know it at all,” Pete interjected.

“Luckily I remembered where they met him—at the Shakti Centre in Malibu. It’s one of those spiritual places where you can take all kinds of courses—Chakra massage, yoga, meditation, singing bowls and so on. I figured that we can find out who appeared as Osiris at the healing meditation workshop last week, so I called the centre just now, but no one answered.”

“Good idea, Bob!” Jupe praised.

“Besides, I thought it would be important to talk to someone who knew Frank Corman personally. He didn’t have any family, so I called his management—the Stars & Stiles agency in West Hollywood. and I have an appointment there today.”

“Excellent!”

“But not for another two hours. So I could still go with you to Aunt Pat’s.”

“Then we’d better not waste any time!” Jupiter said and the three of them set off.

When they reached Spirit Grove, there was only an old purple Corvette in front of the house this time. Bob parked his Beetle, which they had come here in, next to it. Then they went to the front door and knocked.

At first, there was no response, but after Pete knocked a second time, they heard shuffling footsteps from inside and shortly afterwards, the door was opened.

Patricia Osborne stood in front of them, squinting in the sun. Her hair was dishevelled and she looked distraught at the three boys. “Oh, it’s you again.”

“Excuse me, Miss Osborne, did we wake you?” asked Jupiter.

“Excuse me? Yes... I lay down for a moment... must have dozed off. I didn’t sleep a wink last night.”

“I can imagine that,” Pete said sympathetically, “after what happened yesterday.”

“What are you doing here again?” She sounded more surprised than annoyed.

“Checking in to see how you are,” Bob said. “We’re really sorry we woke you up.”

“Oh, it’s all right,” Aunt Pat sighed and opened the door invitingly. “Come on in. I’ll get you some lemonade. It’s such a warm day today.”

“Thank you,” Bob said, and they stepped through the door into the hallway, whose walls—as they had noticed the night before—were hung with colourful scarves and posters of mandalas. The large kitchen, which branched off from there, didn’t look much different, except that there were also small crystals, dream catchers, and dried herbs hanging everywhere.

On the kitchen wall, there was nothing to remind them of the blood writing, except perhaps that the tiles shone a little cleaner in that spot. The rest of the kitchen was rather shiny. They knew from earlier that Patricia Osborne was often overwhelmed by even simple household tasks. Her two housemates also seemed to have problems with this. Dirty dishes were piled up in the sink and the table was full of used cups.

Fortunately, it was exactly what The Three Investigators had speculated on.

“Oh dear, there’s no lemonade in the house at all,” Aunt Pat complained as she stood in front of the open fridge. “Sunshine and I only ever drink tea made from herbs we harvested ourselves—some have to be picked in the morning, some in the evening. Vandaan drinks orange juice, but he’s very particular about that. I don’t know if I can give you some of his orange juice...”

“Tea is wonderful,” Bob assured her.

“Miss Osborne,” Jupiter began, while Aunt Pat fiddled with the kettle and a tea tin, “we’ve also come here to continue our investigation.”

“Oh, that’s not necessary at all, Jupiter. Mr Giggles can’t hurt me now. I’ve locked him in the broom closet.”

Jupiter rolled his eyes inwardly, but then he luckily came up with a rebutting argument: “He doesn’t seem to necessarily have to be out here to cause damage. Last night, for

example, he was on the verandah the whole time. That didn't stop the blood writing on the wall, though."

"Well, you're right of course," muttered Aunt Pat, "but what can you do?"

"As I said, continue to investigate. To this end, we would first like to secure the fingerprints of every occupant of the house."

"Fingerprints? But what's the point?"

"It's standard procedure," Bob claimed. "We always do this when we have a new case underway."

"But what do my housemates have to do with it? No, that doesn't suit me. Besides, Vandaan is at work, and Sunshine is giving a course in Santa Barbara. She won't be back until late today. Anyway, taking fingerprints is what they do for criminals. You don't do things like that!"

"Then we would at least like to subject Mr Giggles to a closer examination," Jupiter tried.

"No," said Aunt Pat adamantly, "because you might damage him. He's very precious. The tea is ready." She poured four mugs full and handed three of them to the boys. They all sipped the brew carefully.

The tea tasted a bit like old socks soaked in hot water, but it probably had to be that way. Only Jupiter was too deep in thought to pay attention to the strong taste. He thought about whether they should tell Aunt Pat about the creepy video so that she would finally realize that it was better to let them continue investigating... but then he had a better idea.

"Hold on! I have a call coming in," he claimed, pointing to his pocket. "My phone is on vibration mode," he added when Bob and Pete, who hadn't heard any ringing at all, looked at him questioningly. Then he excused himself and left the kitchen. Outside in the hallway, his muffled voice could be heard.

"Yummy, the tea," Pete lied to bridge the awkward silence that had spread.

"Yes, quite good," said Bob.

"Isn't it?"

Then Jupiter came back.

"Who called you?" asked Pete.

Before Jupiter could answer, the landline phone rang upstairs.

"Oh, excuse me," Aunt Pat said and left the kitchen.

Pete groaned. "Aunt Pat is really persistent. I think we have to abort our investigation. She doesn't want anyone to help her at all. She thinks it's all nonsense. Without Sunshine on our side, we're at a loss... and the tea is disgusting too." He went to the sink and poured his into the sink.

"We're taking fingerprints now," Juve instructed. "Be careful not to damage anything."

Involuntarily, Pete lowered his voice. "But we don't know how long Aunt Pat will be on the phone! She could be back here any second!"

"She'll be busy for a few minutes," Jupiter predicted, "because my mobile phone didn't ring at all. Instead, I called Allie and told her to distract her aunt. Get to work, fellas! Bob, you and I will take action here. Pete, you take care of Mr Giggles. He's in the broom closet. Check him out. With any luck, there'll be fingerprints on his face. That's where Osiris was holding him last night."

"What if I run into Aunt Pat?"

"Then you'll think of something," was Jupiter's answer.

Pete shrugged his shoulders and left the kitchen. In the hallway, he looked around. There was a narrow door under the stairs. It was locked, but the key was in it. In the small room

behind it, Mr Giggles was seated on an overturned bucket among the brooms and cleaning materials, grinning at him. When Pete switched on the bare light bulb dangling from the ceiling, the puppet's eyes flashed as if there was life in them.

"Now wait a minute, Mr Giggles," Pete muttered. "You don't scare me!" He got down on his knees in front of the doll and looked at its head. It was made of varnished wood. Perfect. Pete pulled the little bag with the fingerprint brush out of his pocket and got to work. It was a piece of cake to make the prints visible and secure them. Pete only needed a few minutes. Afterwards, he thoroughly removed the traces of his work.

Then he listened in the stairwell. Aunt Pat was still on the phone. Pete carefully picked up Mr Giggles and examined him closely. His black waistcoat and white shirt had small pockets, but they were empty. Pete put his right hand into the opening at the lower back until he reached inside the doll's hollow head. His fingers felt the mechanism that moved the mouth, eyes and eyebrows. The opening and closing of the mouth was easy, but the rest required a bit of practice.

Pete played around with Mr Giggles for a moment. "Well, you silly doll," he said. "You're nothing but that—a doll. Just so you know..." Determined, he looked into the doll's green glass eyes and stared.

Suddenly, he heard Aunt Pat's footsteps on the top steps.

He quickly put Mr Giggles back on the bucket, switched off the light, quietly closed the door and hurried back into the kitchen.

"That was Allie on the phone," Aunt Pat reported when she was back with the boys a moment later. "She was asking about you guys. I explained to her that I only agreed to this silly idea for Sunshine's sake... but I'm still against fingerprinting."

"All right," Jupiter relented. "Then we'll be on our way again. I'm glad you're feeling a bit better... and thank you for the tea!"

A short time later, they had left the house and were standing in front of Bob's car. "So?" the First Investigator turned to Pete. "How did it go?"

"I have the fingerprints," Pete said proudly and handed Jupiter the cardboard with the fixed marks. "However, there was nothing else conspicuous about the doll... except for one thing—what colour are Mr Giggles's eyes?"

Bob shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know."

"Green," said Jupiter.

Pete dropped his shoulders in disappointment. "Is that so? Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"I could have bet they were blue."

But Jupiter, who had an infallible memory, shook his head.

"All right. Then I haven't discovered anything unusual after all. Forget it."

"So let's take care of the fingerprints," Jupiter said. "While Aunt Pat was on the phone, we were able to secure her prints on the tea tin. There wasn't enough time for her housemates, but we got this..." He opened his backpack a crack. "A used orange juice glass and this tea mug from the sink."

"The glass must be Vandaan's," Pete said.

"And the cup says 'Sunshine' on it," Bob said. "We hope she used it too. In any case, with the mess in the kitchen, no one will miss these anytime soon."

They drove back to the salvage yard. Pete and Jupiter got off there. Bob said goodbye to continue towards Hollywood, where he had his appointment with the artist agency Stars &

Stiles.

Pete got into his MG and set off for Santa Monica to visit the Shakti Centre. Jupiter stayed alone at Headquarters and got straight to work.

In their small laboratory, it was not difficult to secure the fingerprints on the orange juice glass and the tea cup. Jupe took the small cardboard card with the prints from the CD, which he had put on the night before, and compared the traces.

“Interesting,” murmured the First Investigator. “Very interesting.”

When he was absolutely sure, he rose from his chair, left the trailer, swung on his bicycle and set off for Malibu.

## 7. Stars & Stiles

The reception room of Stars & Stiles was furnished in a modern style. Carefully lit large portrait photographs of the artists represented by the agency hung on the otherwise bare concrete walls.

Behind the elegantly curved desk, sitting bolt upright, was the boss herself. Trixie Stiles had short, silvery hair and alert eyes. She was on the phone when Bob entered and told him she would be right with him.

Bob looked at the photos with interest. He knew some of the actors. There was a large black and white photo of Frank Corman posing with Mr Giggles. In another, taken from a newspaper article, he was on the red carpet with a much younger Trixie Stiles. That had been at an Academy Awards ceremony where he had performed as a comedian, as Bob gathered from the caption, and Trixie Stiles was then known as Trixie Hill. The two beamed hand in hand at the camera and Bob wondered if they had been a couple.

“So, now I have time for you,” Mrs Stiles said. “Have a seat!”

Bob turned away from the photos, and sat down on a spotless white sofa.

“So you want to talk to me about Frank Corman?”

“About Frank Corman and Mr Giggles,” Bob said. “It’s for a school project.” It was usually better to tell adults about school projects, then they were much more willing to help. It was usually harder for people to believe that they were really investigators. “We are supposed to do research on a famous artist. Everyone else in my class picked their favourite singer or actor. I chose Frank Corman because I used to watch *The Frank and Giggles Show* with my grandma.”

“How lovely,” thought Mrs Stiles. “Dear, dear Frank! He would have been so pleased that young people still know him today. He won the hearts of many with his show and his performances—even when his great television days were long gone. After his death, I received so many letters from people who cared about him!”

“How did you meet him then?”

“Oh, I knew him from circus days. Frank performed in the Bonfanti Circus, which I managed because the owner, who was also the ringmaster, had no talent for it.” A rapturous expression came into her eyes. “We were a couple then, and we both wanted to get away from the circus. Frank had never really been happy there and I knew from the beginning that he really belonged in television. Eventually, that worked out and from then on, I was his manager. We didn’t do the couple thing later on though, as it didn’t work out well.” She laughed.

Bob flipped open his notepad and started jotting down a few keywords. “What was Frank Corman like?”

“Oh, he was a madman!” laughed Mrs Stiles. “A madman in the best sense of the word. He was always busy with his puppet. When he came into the agency, Mr Giggles would usually stick his head in the door and shout: ‘Hello, it’s Mr Giggles again!’ Sometimes it felt as if the puppet had a life of its own. It was a bit creepy. At the same time, Frank was highly professional. For all his sense of mischief—once the cameras were rolling, he was focused.

Anyway, he was a humanitarian—always did a lot for others and was constantly at charity events. For many of his performances, he took no fee if they were for a good cause.”

“I see. Then it was probably also at his request that Mr Giggles was auctioned off,” Bob assumed.

Mrs Stiles blinked in irritation. “Auctioned? Was it auctioned off? I don’t know anything about that.”

“Yes, for a good cause.”

“When was that?”

“Two and a half weeks ago.”

“Strange...” Mrs Stiles murmured. “I guess Bryan didn’t want Mr Giggles then. It seemed strange to me anyway.”

Now Bob was surprised. “Bryan?”

“Bryan Bonfanti. Frank left him the puppet.”

“Bonfanti? As in the Bonfanti Circus?”

“Yes, exactly. Bryan is the circus owner’s son. He was mentioned in Frank’s will. I have to admit that surprised me a bit. I thought Frank would bequeath Mr Giggles to the CBC Studios and his producer Mr Fernandez—the person who made him famous.”

Bob wrote diligently. “So it went to Bryan Bonfanti instead. Are you sure about that?”

“Quite sure... because the notary called me here as he thought the doll he was supposed to hand over to Bryan was with me. However, I had already taken it to the CBC Studios. As I said, I had assumed that it would end up there anyway. That’s what I told the notary. I guess Bryan was able to pick up the doll at the studio. I find it strange that he auctioned it off afterwards, though. He could have sold the doll to the studio if he didn’t want to keep it. I’m sure Mr Fernandez would have liked to take it too, after all Mr Giggles was a sort of mascot for CBC Studios for many years.”

“Frank and Bryan must have been good friends if he left Mr Giggles to him,” Bob remarked.

“Not really. Frank and Bryan were not friends at all. Bryan was a little boy when his father died in an accident which marked the end of the circus. You probably don’t know anything about that.”

“You mean the circus disaster? Yes, I read about that. The circus tent collapsed in a storm, didn’t it?”

She nodded and her face darkened. “There was a storm warning and even instructions from the police to cancel the performance. However, Mr Bonfanti, the owner, threw them to the wind. None of the rest of us knew anything about it. During the performance, the tent collapsed. Three people died and among them, Mr Bonfanti himself. He left behind his wife and his son Bryan. The insurance didn’t pay much for the disaster, and we had huge debts. That was the end of the circus.”

“That’s tragic,” Bob said sympathetically.

“Yes. Frank always felt a bit responsible for Bryan afterwards, because the boy had a hard time, of course. His father was responsible for what happened. What I knew was that Frank sent Bryan money regularly. I think there was also a guilty conscience involved, because with the end of the circus, Frank’s own career really took off. As luck would have it, Mr Fernandez was sitting in that last performance. He was already a television producer at the time and was looking for talented artists for new shows. Mr Fernandez discovered Frank that evening. An irony of fate.”

“Do you think that’s why Frank left Mr Giggles to Bryan Bonfanti, so he could perhaps... cash in on it... to keep supporting himself?”



“Possibly... but it’s funny, because they never really had much contact. Frank sent him money, Bryan thanked him with cards for Christmas and his birthday. That’s all it was. In any case, you also have to remember that Frank was mentally deteriorating a lot in his last months. Towards the end, he was downright confused. Who knows what prompted him to bequeath the doll to Bryan?”

Bob felt he had hit upon an interesting lead here. “I might like to follow this up and talk to Bryan. Do you happen to have his address?”

Trixie Stiles frowned. “Follow up? It sounds like you’re with the police. Are you sure you really want to know all this just for a school project?”

Bob had actually forgotten his cover for a moment, but he was not about to reveal any more details. “Yes, yes. I’m on the edge of my seat, you know. My presentation has to be really good.”

The agency owner smiled mildly and began to rummage in an old-fashioned card index box. “I don’t want your college admission to fail because of me. I have the address here somewhere.”

She found the relevant index card and jotted down the address on a piece of paper. As she wrote, she said, lost in thought: “You know, I myself would be interested to know what Frank was thinking... and how Bryan could just sell Mr Giggles to anyone. I don’t know what kind of person he is. I last saw him when he was a little boy. It pains me that he seems to care so little about Mr Giggles, because to Frank, the doll was very important.

“Sometimes Frank overdid it too, especially in the last few years when he got a bit weird with age. He hardly ever put Mr Giggles down and probably talked to him when he was alone. Apart from that, Frank was Mr Giggles... and Mr Giggles was Frank. Without him, the puppet would have been just a piece of wood with cloth around it. Through Frank, it became a... how shall I say... ‘person’. The puppet sort of came to life... and in a way, it still is. When I see Mr Giggles, I will always see Frank. A piece of Frank will live on in Mr Giggles.”

## 8. Vandaan's Secret

Malibu was not very big, and was basically a stretch of coast where rich people lived in their little villas and beach houses. It was not far from Rocky Beach, so Jupiter could cycle the distance.

The First Investigator didn't really know where to look for the vegan supermarket. Eventually, a grumpy hot dog vendor at a beach car park told him that the shop was squeezed between the small apartment buildings above the coastal road. "That's where all those freaks live who just stuff grains down their throats all day long instead of eating something proper for a change. Want a hot dog?"

Jupiter took two, then made his way up the coastal road. Ten minutes later, he had found the supermarket. It was tiny and only a few cars fit in the car park. At the moment, the old van they had seen outside Spirit Grove the night before was there alone. Jupiter parked his bike and entered the shop. Inside, it looked a bit like an old corner shop. Flour, sugar and salt were offered in big sacks with little scoops stuck in them. Fruit and vegetables were draped in wooden crates.

Vandaan stood behind the sales counter. He was wearing a colourful wide shirt embroidered with Indian-looking ornaments. When he recognized Jupiter, he visibly flinched and needed a moment to regain his composure.

"Oh, what a coincidence!" he exclaimed, struggling to smile and managing to maintain eye contact for a few seconds before pretending to be busy rearranging the sacks and boxes around him. "Do you live around here? You want to buy something?"

"I want to see you, Vandaan."

"Oh, I see. What... uh... can I do for you?"

"You can explain this to me," Jupiter said and put the CD with the Mr Giggles face drawn on it on the counter.

"A... a CD?" Vandaan licked his lips nervously. "Is that for me?"

"It's not for you, it's from you," Jupiter enlightened him, "as you know very well... because it has your fingerprints on it."

"My... what?"

The First Investigator held his raised index finger out to him. "Prints... from your fingers."

"But where from—"

"We are investigators," Jupiter reminded him, "and now I'd like to get straight to the point—are you behind the whole Giggles spook?"

Vandaan looked honestly startled. "What? No!"

"Did you smear the blood on the kitchen wall yesterday?"

"No! For goodness' sake!"

"Why did you put this CD into Bob's backpack? What is this video recording? And what do you know about Mr Giggles?"

He could literally see Vandaan desperately looking for an excuse, but then the façade crumbled and panic entered the little man's eyes. "You can't tell her! No way!"

"Who am I not allowed to tell what?"

“Patricia! She can’t know that I... that I was watching her and... uh... filmed her... secretly.”

“You mean the person in the woods on the video?” asked Jupiter in surprise. “That was Miss Osborne?”

Vandaan nodded.

“Now I’m curious. Tell me what exactly happened that night!”

Vandaan gnawed on his lower lip and struggled for words. When he finally spoke, he looked fixedly at the sales counter. “Patricia collects herbs in the forest at night... preferably during a full moon, because they work better then—the herbs, I mean. It has to do with the cosmic energies, you know.”

“So what’s with the video recording?” Jupe probed.

“I... well... I watched her... uh... gathering herbs.”

Jupiter frowned. “Why?”

“Because... because... because she’s so oblivious about it... and so... uh... attractive.” Vandaan spoke the last sentence so softly that Jupiter barely understood it. The man’s otherwise pale face flamed red.

The First Investigator raised his eyebrows. “You... have feelings for Miss Osborne?”

“She doesn’t know about it! And she can’t know either!”

Jupiter suppressed a smirk. “If you tell me the rest of the story, she won’t hear anything from me.”

Vandaan nodded and his skin became a little lighter again. “So I filmed her. I thought maybe I’d paint her gathering herbs by moonlight at night and give her the picture for her birthday. Then... then that’s when I heard that voice... and saw that horrible doll sitting on the stone. It spoke and moved on its own! You’ve seen the video recording.”

Jupiter nodded. “So the doll spoke to Miss Osborne, and she fled in fright.”

“So did I. When Mr Giggles suddenly looked at me, I panicked and ran into the forest. Only half an hour later, I dared to go back... but the doll was no longer there.”

“Had it been sitting on the stone when you first went into the garden?” Jupiter wanted to know.

“No. It must have come out of the house while we were in the forest.”

“Or someone put it there,” Jupiter interjected. “Do you think that’s conceivable?”

“So it seemed. We weren’t in the garden for half an hour... but I think it went there itself.”

Jupiter nodded thoughtfully. “Was there anything else unusual that evening? Did you perhaps have a visitor? Osiris, perhaps?”

Vandaan shook his head. “It was just a normal evening. No visitors. Sunshine had already gone to bed, and we didn’t even know Osiris at that point. The whole spooky thing didn’t start until that full moon night.”

“I don’t understand one thing,” Jupiter said. “Why didn’t Miss Osborne tell us about this incident? She only spoke of Mr Giggles wandering about the house as if by magic. She never mentioned that it spoke to her in the garden in the middle of the night! Did she say anything to you?”

Vandaan shook his head. “No... and I’ve been wondering the same thing for a week. I’ve tried to approach her about it, of course, in such a way that she doesn’t realize I was there watching everything... otherwise I would have had to explain why I was out there in the middle of the night. But all she talked about was that the doll was sitting somewhere else every day and that we should do something about it. She started drawing spell circles around the doll and lighting candles... but she didn’t say a word about that night.”

Jupiter pinched his lower lip, lost in thought. “You didn’t say anything about it last night either, so as not to give yourself away. Instead, you put the CD into Bob’s backpack. At first, we thought that someone was trying to stop us from investigating further, but the opposite was true. You wanted to prove to us that Mr Giggles was really haunted, so we’d stay on the case.”

“That’s exactly how it was. I overheard your conversation on the verandah as my room is directly above it and the window was open. When I heard you were taking the case as investigators, I wanted to somehow tip you off that Patricia was hiding something—without her finding out that I know she’s hiding something. You understand?”

“Quite. So you quickly burned your recording onto a CD and drew Mr Giggles’s face on it... but you could have just talked to us, Vandaan. Miss Osborne wouldn’t have had to know.”

“I... didn’t dare,” Vandaan confessed, looking down at the ground in shame.

“You should be more daring in general,” Jupiter advised, thinking of Vandaan’s feelings for Aunt Pat. Then he returned to the subject: “What about the blood writing in the kitchen?”

“It really wasn’t me! I have nothing to do with that! It was just like I said! The writing was already there when I went into the kitchen.”

“And you didn’t chase us with the car last night either?”

“Heavens no, why should I have done that?”

Jupiter remembered the van that was parked in front of the supermarket, and of its round headlights. “It’s all right. It was just a question. I have one last one—can you make any sense of all these incidents? Do you have any idea who might be behind it? Or what someone might want with a haunted Mr Giggles or a frightened Patricia Osborne?”

Vandaan’s gaze took on a feverish quality. “I can’t explain it... but I think Osiris is behind it.”

“But you just said you only met him after that night,” Jupiter reminded him. “That doesn’t add up.”

“Well... if you put it that way, then yes... maybe Osiris wanted Patricia to hire him as a shaman. Maybe he... summoned the dark forces that now reside in Mr Giggles.”

Jupiter swallowed any biting comments that were on the tip of his tongue and instead said: “But you took part in that ritual yesterday. You seem to have confidence in his abilities.”

Vandaan shook his head. “I only did that to keep an eye on him. I have no proof, but there is something wrong with Osiris. He has a dark aura. He’s lying, I can feel it... and yet everyone believes him. Patricia adores him. Maybe he has put a spell on her! If he’s capable of that, he might be up to much worse!”

## 9. Under the Bed

When Pete reached the Shakti Centre in Santa Monica, it was still closed. From a notice in a glass box next to the entrance, he saw that there would be a mindfulness class at five. That was in less than an hour. Pete leaned on a wall and waited.

After half an hour, Jupiter called and reported on his conversation with Vandaan. “Have you found out anything about Osiris yet?”

“No, I’m still waiting for the mindfulness class to start. What is that anyway?”

“Something about finding your inner centre,” Jupiter claimed.

“Well, I know where my inner centre is. It’s where my stomach is starting to growl. If someone doesn’t show up here soon, I’ll probably have to storm that burger joint over there and—oh, someone’s coming! He’s probably leading the mindfulness class. I have to go, Juve, see you later!”

A young man approached. He had long hair, a fuzzy beard and wore Jesus sandals on his feet. “Do you want to join us?”

“Uh... not really,” Pete mumbled. “I just have a question.”

“Okay, I have to get the place ready first. Just give me a minute...” The young man unlocked the door and led the Second Investigator into a plain room where there was not much except colourful fabric on the walls and cushions on the floor. The man then lit some incense sticks in front of a stone Buddha in the corner. Then he sat down on one of the colourful cushions, looked at Pete and said: “Okay, I’m listening...”

“Well, it’s like this. My aunt Pat was here the other day... uh... at the healing meditation class. That’s where she met a man.”

Pete had made up this little story while he was waiting outside earlier. However, as he told it, it got a little out of hand. He reported that since meeting this man, his aunt Pat had been convinced that she knew him from a previous life, and that she had unfortunately forgot to ask him for his real name, and that she had been desperate ever since. The only reason she did not come herself was because she had been busy for two days sending out her spirit to make contact with the man. As he, Pete, was more pragmatically inclined, he had therefore come here to help his aunt.

While the Second Investigator was rambling on, he was convinced that he was heading for disaster and would soon be kicked out of the Shakti Centre. However, his yarn was already overstretched and he couldn’t go back, so he quickly ended his story by saying: “Yes, and so I thought I’d ask if you knew him. He is known as Osiris...”

“Osiris!” ‘Jesus’ exclaimed, surprisingly friendly. “Why didn’t you say so?”

“Well...” Pete continued, “probably that’s not really his name, and—”

“I know him. Before he chose his own name, his parents called him Dave Greenwood. He lives in Topanga.” The man leaned forward conspiratorially. “But next time your story doesn’t have to be quite so enterprising. I would have helped your aunt out the same way if she had a crush on him. One should never stand in the way of the divine power of love.” He winked at Pete.

“I see... uh... yes, thank you,” the Second Investigator said and made his way out.

On the road, he took one deep breath before walking to his car and making his way to Topanga.

Dave Greenwood's address was quickly located in a phone book and after twenty minutes, Pete was standing in front of an unadorned block of apartments. He pressed a few door bell buttons until someone unquestioningly pressed the buzzer to let him in.

On the third floor, Pete found the door with a name plate that said: 'Greenwood'. The Second Investigator put his ear to the door. It was so thin that he would surely hear something if someone was home. Pete hoped that no one stepped out of one of the neighbouring apartments by surprise and caught him. Finally, he knocked, ready to escape should anything stir inside.

However, nothing happened.

Pete pulled out his lock pick set and tampered with the door. The lock was simple, he soon had it open and slipped into the apartment.

It consisted of a single room with an adjoining bathroom, the door half open. No one was here. Pete breathed a sigh of relief and closed the door behind him before looking around. Actually, he had expected an interior similar to that of the Shakti Centre or Spirit Grove—colourful cloths, a Buddha in the corner... instead there were empty beer cans and a Los Angeles Dodgers pennant hanging on the wall. Even the sparsely stocked bookshelf did not contain any textbooks on life advice or zodiac signs, but only a few books on marketing strategies with titles like *Sell Yourself!* and *The Charm Principle*.

Pete was still wondering when he suddenly heard footsteps in the corridor. They came closer and closer... and stopped right in front of the door!

The Second Investigator froze.

Nothing happened. And nothing could be heard anymore. It was as if someone was listening outside, just as he had done earlier. Had he given himself away by doing something?

For minutes, Pete did not dare to move. Then suddenly the doorknob turned!

Pete threw himself on the floor and rolled over some dirty socks under the bed.

Someone entered the apartment. Pete saw a pair of colourful, fluttery trousers. Osiris? However, the intruder started muttering to himself: "What am I doing here anyway? What am I doing here!" Then Pete realized that it was not Osiris.

He rolled out from under the bed.

"Vandaan! What are you doing here?"

Vandaan almost fainted from shock. "Pete! What... what are you doing here!"

"I asked first. How did you even get in here?"

"The... the door just opened like that. I was outside, and I thought no one was in here. I just wanted to check on Osiris."

"Check on him?"

"Yes!" Vandaan slowly recovered from his shock. "Jupiter told me to be more daring... uh... and he's right. So I've taken matters into my own hands. I want to expose Osiris."

"But I'm already monitoring him. It would be better if—"

He fell silent, because again he heard footsteps in the corridor. Now, there were two people talking to each other.

One of them was Osiris.

"Quick!" hissed Pete. "Under the bed!"

Vandaan turned pale. "But—"

"Now!" He pulled Vandaan to the floor and pushed him under the bed before scrambling after him himself. He looked straight into Vandaan's fear-widened eyes and put his index finger to his lips in warning. Vandaan nodded silently.

Then the door opened.

This time Pete saw nothing, as he was lying with his back to the entrance, and he no longer dared to turn around.

But he could hear everything.

"This stupid door. I really need to fix it. Sometimes it doesn't close properly." That was Osiris. He entered the apartment with someone else and opened the fridge. "I knew I had some beers left. Here you go."

"Thank you," said the other person, a man. "Shall we go back to the park now?"

Osiris sighed. "There are always all those hippies with their drums in the afternoon. They get on my nerves."

"But why? That's exactly your target group!"

"Yes, but I consider that my job. Right now I'm off work and I would really appreciate not having those people around."

"Or are you afraid of being recognized? They would probably be quite surprised if they saw you in the park in tracksuit bottoms instead of hippie clothes."

"Believe me, they wouldn't recognize me. They only notice people who wear colourful loose-fitting tops, baggy pants, and wooden-bead necklaces. Besides, I don't think I know any of the drummers. You have no idea how many of those crystal-wielding esoteric weirdos there are. Los Angeles is full of them!"

"That's why you never get caught," the other man remarked.

"Exactly... and even if someone sees through me and warns others about me—I just move on and think up a new name. Meditation seminars and singing bowl workshops are a dime a dozen here... and so are needy weirdos to whom I can sell a little help with life."

"What's your name right now?"

"Osiris."

The friend laughed out loud. "And where are you hanging out at the moment?"

"I went to the Shakti Centre in Santa Monica a couple of times."

"What is it this time? Past life regression?"

"Healing meditation," Osiris said.

"So, any takers yet?"

"Yeah. Some nutcase who needs help exorcizing demons. She seriously thinks her doll is possessed by a ghost!"

"Oh, something new... and how much do you charge for your services?"

"So far, nothing at all. That would only arouse suspicion... but at some point, I will make it clear to her that I can no longer work for free."

"Does she have any money?"

"I thought she had, but apparently she spends all her dough on Hollywood collector's stuff. Anyway, I'll take it too, because I think that stuff can be worth quite a bit."

"If she parts with it..."

"Sooner or later she will. I just have to convince her that the evil spirits will never leave her without my help. Believe me, I can do that easily." Osiris laughed maliciously.

"It's warm in your room. Shouldn't we go back to the park? I don't hear the drums anymore."

Osiris sighed. "All right. For your sake, let's go."

The two left the apartment. Osiris locked the door from the outside and checked twice that the door was really closed before they left.

## 10. The House at the End of the Street

Bryan Bonfanti lived in a small house at the end of a cul-de-sac in a quiet residential area of Topanga. It was a little out of the way of the other properties. The paint was peeling off the façade and the garden was overgrown. In front of the garage was an old Mercedes. Its stained rear bumper was hanging slightly askew.

Bob stepped through a musty wooden garden gate and knocked on the door. A little later, a man in his fifties opened it for him. He was wearing shorts and a flannel shirt with the sleeves rolled up. He had black hair streaked with grey and alert eyes with which he eyed Bob. “Yes?”

“Good afternoon, sir, my name is Bob Andrews. Are you Bryan Bonfanti?”

The man nodded wordlessly.

“If you have a moment, I’d like to talk to you. It’s about Frank Corman and Mr Giggles.” As Bryan Bonfanti didn’t answer immediately, he added: “It’s for a school project.”

“For a school project,” Mr Bonfanti repeated tonelessly, unsettling Bob with his inscrutable gaze.

“Yes, exactly,” Bob continued irritably. “I’ve already been to the Stars & Stiles agency that represented Mr Corman. There I learned that Frank Corman had bequeathed his doll to you. That... uh... is true, isn’t it?”

Bryan Bonfanti looked at him blankly and remained silent for so long that Bob became nervous. He was about to repeat his question when Bryan said: “Yes.”

“I see... uh... weren’t you very surprised that Frank Corman bequeathed the doll to you, of all people?”

Bryan’s eyes narrowed slightly. “Yes.”

“And... and do you still have an explanation for that?”

At first, it seemed as if Bryan Bonfanti would not answer at all, but then he took half a step out of the door and looked down at Bob, who was a good deal shorter. His voice was lowered to a raspy whisper. “In the wrong hands, the doll is dangerous... very dangerous. That’s what Frank told me. Mr Giggles is not to be trifled with. He is someone who wants the truth. Lies bring out the worst in him. That’s why Frank left him to me. Do you understand what I said?”

Bob swallowed and nodded quickly.

“Good,” Bryan said, stepping back behind the threshold and slamming the door in Bob’s face.

Puzzled, Bob blinked a few times before retreating, deeply confused. What was that all about? He had no idea how to proceed from here, so he returned to his car, which was parked slightly off to the side, pulled out his mobile phone and dialled Jupiter’s number.

“Hi, Bob, what’s up?”

“Jupe, I’m irritated.” Bob told the First Investigator about his successful conversation with Trixie Stiles and the considerably less successful one with Bryan Bonfanti. “I don’t know what is going on there, but I guess he didn’t believe my school project story for a second. That’s why he was so dismissive of me and said all these weird things. What am I supposed to do now?”



“Hmm...” Jupiter murmured. “I normally take the view that we should not necessarily reveal more than necessary to others during investigations, but there are exceptions. In this case, I would go back and try to clarify the matter. Tell him that we are investigating the case of a haunted doll. He seems to know something.”

“Okay, then I’ll do that. If he slams the door in my face a second time, I’ll be back in Rocky Beach in twenty minutes. Of course, if things go well, it will take half an hour longer. See you later!”

Bob hung up, turned around and walked back to the house at the end of the street. At the front door, he straightened his shoulders and knocked again.

No one responded.

Bob tried again. “Mr Bonfanti?” he called out. “Listen, I may have got off on the wrong foot. I’d like to talk to you. I didn’t tell you the truth, but I can explain everything.”

No answer.

It was certainly Mr Bonfanti’s right not to want to speak to Bob. However, Bob found it very rude to leave him standing outside the door.

Cautiously, he turned the doorknob, but the door was locked. He considered going around the house to look for a back entrance. It was doubtful, however, whether this would win Bonfanti’s sympathy. On the other hand—maybe Bonfanti was behind the house and didn’t hear the knock.

Bob turned away from the door and walked to the narrow path that led between the garage and the wall of the house to the back of the house.

He had just walked past the Mercedes parked in front of the garage, when he jolted and approached the car again. He looked at the front. The headlights had an old-fashioned and rather angular shape.

Bob was half alarmed. He didn’t know if it was the car that had been following them the night before. He didn’t even know if they had really been followed. In any case, he reminded himself to be careful as he continued on his way.

The path past the house was half overgrown with tall grass. Bob had not quite made it to the back when he suddenly heard a voice nearby.

“Hello, it’s Mr Giggles again!”

Bob stopped in mid-motion and listened.

“Frank, you have a big pimple on your nose. It looks really bad, that pimple. What did you do? Pressed on it? Tell me!”

The voice seemed to come from below! Then Bob discovered a basement window at his feet. It was barred and only two handwidths high and also so overgrown with grass that it was hardly visible. Bob crouched down, carefully pushed down the grass and peered through the bars into the basement room.

A large computer monitor bathed it in cold light. Bryan had obviously set up his study down there. Two more monitors stood on two large desks against the wall, including several computers. Cables were coiled everywhere. Only one of the monitors was on, and on it was *The Frank and Giggles Show*.

“You say right now into the camera that I’m the best show host ever, Frank! Otherwise I won’t let you go!”

However, Bob had no eyes for the flickering video image. He stared spellbound at the only spectator, who sat on a chair slightly turned away from the window and followed the programme attentively.

It was Mr Giggles.

He moved his mouth as if he was speaking along with the dialogue of the show... and he moved his hands too, but there was nobody next to him. The puppet moved all by itself! He was alive... and slowly turned his head in Bob's direction!

Bob jerked back and pressed himself against the wall of the house. His heart was racing. Had Mr Giggles seen him?

At the same moment, Bob almost laughed. He seriously wondered if a ventriloquist's dummy had seen him, but he knew that was impossible! On the other hand, many things were impossible here and happened anyway, for example, the puppet should have been with Patricia Osborne. Why was it here?

Bob had to do something. He had to solve this mystery, and he had to do it now. If he called Jupiter and Pete first and waited for them to support him, the whole thing might be over.

"Courage, Bob," he whispered to himself and got up. Quietly, he went further behind the house. There was a door there. Holding his breath, Bob tried to open it. It was unlocked.

As quietly as possible, Bob entered the house. Inside it was rather untidy, but Bob paid no attention. Soon he found the door to the basement. It stood open. The pitch-dark staircase yawned at him. The whisper of the sounds from the video programme came up from below.

Bob stepped onto the first wooden step and prayed that it did not creak. Then he crept down.

It was cool in the basement, and it smelled slightly musty. On the walls were cobweb-covered shelves full of tins, bottles and preserving jars. There was a door at the end of the wide corridor. It was ajar. A flicker of light came through the crack. Bob looked through it and saw the computer monitor.

Mr Giggles sat with his back to Bob and did not move. Just then a new episode began with the familiar opening credits. Frank and Giggles came into the picture. In the next moment, the puppet on the chair turned its head around, further than a human could, and looked at Bob straight in the eye!

Bob felt an icy shiver. It only got worse when the puppet on the chair and the puppet in the video said at the same time: "Hello, it's Mr Giggles again!"

## 11. A Hundred Points for Pete

“And then what?” asked Jupiter. “How did you free yourselves after Osiris locked up?”

Pete had returned to Headquarters five minutes ago and had reported excitedly about his experiences in Topanga.

“Well, with my lock picks, of course,” Pete explained. “I was even able to lock up again. He won’t suspect anything.”

Jupiter shook his head. “That Vandaan almost blew your cover.”

“Indeed, but I have to hand it to him, he was pretty brave. I wouldn’t have believed him. I guess he’ll do anything for his Patricia.”

“I hope you’ve made it clear to him that he’d better not go off on his own like that in future.”

Pete nodded. “I did. I also promised him that we would solve the case. We will, won’t we?”

“I’m very confident about that. At least we already know that Osiris is a charlatan and not a real shaman. We don’t know his exact plans yet. However, he is probably not behind the haunting.”

“He thinks Aunt Pat is a crazy person,” Pete added.

“As enlightening as your investigation has been, Pete, it still boils down to the fact that we urgently need to pay Patricia Osborne another visit. I want to know why she didn’t tell us about the full moon night... but let’s wait until Bob comes back. Maybe his visit to Bryan Bonfanti will bring some fresh insights.”

They waited, but Bob had not come back. Jupe called him, but it only went to voicemail.

Bored, Pete turned to the computer monitor and clicked through the endless videos of *The Frank and Giggles Show* on the Internet, half out of interest, half out of boredom. As long as they were waiting for Bob, watching old episodes of the show might be of some use to their investigation.

After five sketches, however, Pete found the show a little tiring and decided to stop after the sixth video. In it, the ventriloquist and puppet swapped roles and pretended to be each other. Frank Corman had painted on thick eyebrows and combed his hair back tightly, and he opened his eyes to imitate Mr Giggles’s fixed puppet gaze. Mr Giggles, on the other hand, had a wig on, reminiscent of Frank’s hairstyle.

Both looked at the camera with a grin and said nothing. Then Frank lightly poked the doll in the side. “Hey, Frank,” Frank whispered. “Your cue!”

“What? Oh, uh, yes!” Mr Giggles tightened his body. “Welcome to *The Frank and Giggles Show*! With me again today! That is, with me, Frank Corman! And my rather wooden partner Mr Giggles!”

The audience laughed and applauded and Mr Giggles leaned forward conspiratorially and whispered to the audience behind his hand: “But that’s not true at all. You see, I only look like Mr Giggles, but I’m really Frank.” He winked at the camera.

Pete frowned. That looked familiar, didn’t it? He watched that video segment two more times, and then he opened Vandaan’s video.

“Hello, it’s Mr Giggles again! But that’s not true at all. You see, I only look like Mr Giggles, but I’m really Frank.” Not only was it the same wording in the end, but the last two sentences sounded exactly like the scene he had just watched on the Internet!

“Jupe!” cried Pete excitedly.

“I heard,” said Jupiter, who had been watching from the sofa with half attention. Now he was fully focussed.

“They say exactly the same thing in both videos!” announced Pete. “In exactly the same tone of voice!” He grinned. “Did I just solve the puzzle?”

“It looks like it, Pete!”

“Someone compiled the message to Aunt Pat from bits of dialogues from the old shows! If we searched through all the episodes, we’d probably find the other phrases somewhere. So the voice must have come from a tape or something.” Pete became thoughtful. “However, that still doesn’t answer a crucial question.”

“How could Mr Giggles move on his own?”

“Exactly. However... wait a minute... I think I saw something earlier...” Pete turned back to the computer and began to scroll down the page of the video portal.

“What?” asked Jupiter.

“I didn’t think anything of it...” Pete scrolled on. “But now... it could be important.”

“You speak in riddles, Pete.”

“You have been speaking in riddles since the day you were born, Jupe. Now you know how it is on the receiving end. Anyway, I saw a thumbnail that was different from the others. I hope I can find it again. Wait, here it is!”

“Frank Corman and Mr Giggles, as usual,” Jupiter said.

“Yes, except that Giggles is not sitting on Frank’s thigh or on a chair right next to him,” Pete remarked. “In fact, Giggles is some two metres away from Frank. The title of the video is *The Frank and Giggles Christmas Special*.”

Pete started the video. It began with the usual opening credits, but this time with snowflakes trickling over them. Frank and Mr Giggles were also wearing Santa hats. The studio was also decorated for Christmas. The episode had been broadcast as a special episode, it had several guest stars and was twice as long as Pete and Jupiter had guessed from the video description.

At first, everything was as usual. Then when Frank and Mr Giggles joked about always sitting next to each other, Frank took a few steps aside. Much to the delight of the studio audience, Mr Giggles continued to speak, move his mouth and hands without Frank next to him.

“Now that’s a thing! So Mr Giggles can move on his own!”

“It’s a trick, of course, Pete.”

“I realize that, Jupe,” Pete replied, annoyed. “I’m not stupid.”

“I’m sure we’ll soon find out how they pulled this off!” Impatiently, Jupiter pushed the Second Investigator aside in the office chair to take command of the computer himself. He called up a search engine.

Within a short time, he had found the answer. “Here it is! The Christmas special had a few surprises in store. Among other things, it was the first time Mr Giggles was seen in action without Frank playing him. For this amazing trick, CBC Studios had a mechanical puppet specially built and remotely controlled by another person behind the scenes. Mr Giggles’s voice, however, was still Frank’s.

“Although the audience was thrilled, the mechanical Mr Giggles was never used on the show again because Frank Corman felt that his art was not only ventriloquism but also

playing the puppet himself. The mechanical puppet, known as Robo-Giggles in fan circles, looked very much like the original Giggles. However, while the original Giggles has green eyes, Robo-Giggles has blue ones. CBC Studios didn't feel compelled to correct this small blemish because the television viewers couldn't notice it anyway due to the broadcast in black and white."

"Blue eyes!" exclaimed Pete. "There you go!"

Jupiter frowned. "But Aunt Pat's doll has green eyes, we've already talked about that."

"And it seemed funny to me, right. Do you know why?" Pete opened the video from the night of the full moon and chose the spot where Mr Giggles came into view. "Aha!" he exclaimed, pointing at the doll's head. "Blue eyes!"

Jupiter stepped closer to the computer monitor. "It's very difficult to see that in the moonlight."

"Don't talk yourself out of it, Jupe. This Giggles has blue eyes—you can see that quite clearly. You just can't stand it when you didn't notice it first. That's Robo-Giggles right there! And that's why he could move on his own."

"So Aunt Pat owns the original doll, and the one in the garden is the fake one, I mean the 'Robo' one," Jupe concluded.

Pete was thrilled. "Another mystery solved! That gives at least a hundred bonus points to my investigation account!"

"Since when do we have investigation accounts?"

"Since just now."

"All right. A hundred points... and we finally have a hot lead! We just need to find out who owns Robo-Giggles, then we'll know who's behind it. What did the article say? CBC Studios came up with the idea of Robo-Giggles. Then they must also know where the mechanical doll is today."

Jupiter immediately set about finding the phone number of CBC Studios. While he was on hold, he looked at his watch. "I hope I can still reach someone. Office hours are actually over."

However, he was lucky. When someone finally picked up, Jupiter spoke a little lower to sound more adult. "Good afternoon, my name is Jupiter Jones. I work for Boston TV. We are planning a television feature on Frank Corman. In the course of research, I found out that you are in possession of the mechanical doll known as Robo-Giggles. This doll would provide us with some great images. Can you help me with that?"

The lady on the other end could not, but continued to connect Jupiter to someone else. Finally, the First Investigator had someone on the line who could give him information.

"I'm sorry to hear that, Mr Jones, but I'm afraid Robo-Giggles is no longer at our studio here," a young staff member explained to him.

"No? Oh. Where is it then?"

"It is currently back in private hands—possibly for longer, but I'm afraid I can't tell."

"Privately owned? But I thought it belonged to the station. Who has it then?"

"Well, the owner's name might not mean anything to you."

"Possibly not," Jupiter agreed with him, "but it would be really great for me to go and see him to get some shots with the doll."

"All right. The man's name is Bryan Bonfanti."

"Oh," said Jupiter. "The name certainly rings a bell. He was to be given Mr Giggles—well, the original Mr Giggles, as far as I know."

"Oh, then you are well-informed! Well, you're right, Mr Bonfanti should have the original Mr Giggles, but... how shall I say... it's a bit of an unfortunate story. The original

Mr Giggles has disappeared.”

“Disappeared?”

“Yes. It has been stolen. We are still trying to get to the bottom of it. In the meantime, we have given Mr Bonfanti the mechanical doll—as a replacement, so to speak... or as collateral—whatever.”

“That is... exceedingly enlightening, sir!” said Jupiter, his eyes widening as he realized the full implications of this information. “Do you happen to have Mr Bonfanti’s address for me?”

“No, sorry. Just a phone number.”

Jupiter had the number given to him, then he thanked the studio employee and hung up. He turned to the Second Investigator. “So Bryan Bonfanti is behind the whole spook. Bob went to see him without knowing it, and he hasn’t answered my call.”

“Bummer!”

“I don’t have a good feeling about this, Pete.” Worried, Juve called Bob another time, but ended up on voicemail again. “Bob, when you hear this—get in touch immediately and stay away from Bryan Bonfanti!”

“It’s probably too late for that,” Pete said. “We’d better go there now.”

“I agree with you. See if you can find out the address.” They immediately searched the Internet, but they were disappointed. The name ‘Bryan Bonfanti’ did not appear anywhere in connection with an address in California.

Their concern for Bob grew. Again the First Investigator picked up the phone. This time he dialled Bryan Bonfanti’s number.

“What would you want to say to him?” murmured Pete.

“I’ll tell him some tall tale to get him to give us his address.”

But Jupiter didn’t have to think of anything, because no one answered. After the twelfth ring, he hung up. “Pete, we have a problem.”

## 12. Mr Giggles Rattles On

“Hello, it’s Mr Giggles again! Don’t come near me!”

Bob thought he was dreaming. In front of him was a huge Mr Giggles grinning and laughing at him. It had very long arms that held Bob’s hands behind his back, and it kept saying: “Hello, it’s Mr Giggles again! Don’t come near me!”

Bob thought: “I would love to stay away from you, but I can’t—you’re holding me!” Before long, Bob realized that he was only dreaming, and he wondered if it wasn’t very unusual to know that one was dreaming.

Finally, he opened his eyes, and immediately, he saw a grinning Mr Giggles in front.

“Hello, it’s Mr Giggles again! Don’t come near me!”

So he was still dreaming. Only this time it didn’t feel like it... and Mr Giggles wasn’t holding him either. Now he realized that he was facing a computer monitor showing the puppet in black and white.

Bob still couldn’t move. He looked down at himself and realized that he was seated on a chair with his hands and ankles tied up. He was still in Bryan Bonfanti’s basement.

“Hello, it’s Mr Giggles again!” exclaimed the puppet. There was a cut and in another show clip, it said: “Don’t come near me!” Then it started all over again.

The only source of light was from the computer monitor, but there was not much to see. Bob groaned and turned his head. The doll that moved by itself was no longer on the chair. The door was also closed.

Bob tried to remember what had happened. He had spotted Mr Giggles in front of the monitor. Then the doll had turned its head and stared at Bob, and although his heart had sunk into his pants, he had gathered all his courage and entered the basement room. Suddenly, he had received a blow on the head. Someone must have been standing behind the door. Bob had not seen the attacker... but who could it have been but Bryan Bonfanti?

He felt panic rising inside him. What if Bryan was a maniac? What if he left him down here to starve—or worse? What if he couldn’t free himself?

“Stay calm, Bob,” he muttered. “Above all, I have to stay calm now... and then figure out how to get out of here.”

“Hello, it’s Mr Giggles again!” it came from the speakers. “Don’t come near me!”

“And you shut up,” Bob said angrily. Then he tried to move his hands, but the shackles were too tight. So were the ones on his ankles. However, the chair didn’t seem very stable. Maybe he could break it somehow. Bob began to wiggle back and forth, back and forth. The chair creaked, but nothing more happened. Bob took another big swing and tipped to the left, landing on his side with the chair.

“Ouch!” Bob groaned and tried to get himself into a comfortable position, but it was impossible. He took a few deep breaths—and had an idea.

The chair legs were no longer on the floor. So he could simply slip the shackles down over the wooden legs.

It worked! Bob’s legs were free. He rolled onto his knees and stood up with some effort. The back of the chair pushed his upper body forward. Bob lifted his bound arms backwards and the backrest slid down his back. The chair fell to the floor with a thud.

Bob sighed. Now he only had to free his hands.

"Hello, it's Mr Giggles again!"

"Not for long," Bob promised grimly, squatting down and sitting on the seat of his trousers. He was quite limber and actually managed to take his bound arms forward over his bent legs. In the light from the computer monitor, he looked at the knot in detail, then set to work with his teeth. The knot was tight, but eventually it gave way and the shackles came loose. Relieved, Bob rubbed his wrists.

"Hello, it's Mr Giggles again! Don't come near me!"

"Don't worry," said Bob, going to the computer to which the monitor was connected and turning down the volume. He still needed the monitor as a source of light. The little daylight that filtered through the narrow, overgrown basement window was not enough, especially when the sun was already setting.

Bob felt for his mobile phone, but his pockets were empty. Bryan Bonfanti must have taken it from him. He went to the door. It was locked. Bob looked around. There was computer stuff all over the place, but could he find a tool to help him open the door?

He had just decided to take a closer look at the door lock when he heard a rustling. It came from outside through the tiny basement window. Footsteps!

Was that Bonfanti?

Bob pressed himself against the wall and stared up at the window. Someone walked past it. Then someone else... and someone else. Three people.

What should he do? Raise the alarm? If one of them had been Bryan, then it was better to hide behind the door. On the other hand... if the man was accompanied by two other people, Bob would have no chance overpowering them.

Bob went to the door and pressed his ear against the wood. After a while, he heard footsteps in the house and muffled voices. Finally, after what felt like an eternity, there was a squeak of the basement door, followed by a half-loud whisper: "I'm not going down there alone, Juve!"

A heavy stone fell from Bob's heart. He banged on the door and shouted at the top of his lungs: "Pete! I'm down here!"

Immediately, footsteps rumbled down the stairs and the Second Investigator was on the other side of the door. They didn't bother with long explanations, and Pete went straight to work. Bob heard the scratching and scraping in the door lock and after a few seconds, Pete had picked the simple lock. The door swung open.

"Bob! What happened?"

"How did you find me?"

"Later..." said Jupiter, who now stepped behind Pete into the grey flickering light of the computer monitor. "Who locked you in here? Bryan Bonfanti?"

"I suspect so," Bob said. "I'm not 100 per cent sure. Did you overpower him?"

"He's not in the house at all. We were in every room before we turned our attention down here to the basement."

"Is his car in the driveway?"

"No."

Bob sighed with relief. There were now three of them, but he still felt much better not having Bryan around. Then he remembered that he had seen not two but three people pass by the basement window. Before he could ask about it, he heard a female voice from the top of the basement stairs.

"Is everything all right down there with you?"



“Wait a minute, is that—” Bob went to the stairs and looked up. The figure of Trixie Stiles stood out against the light.

“Mrs Stiles!”

“Bob! For goodness’ sake, were you really trapped down there? That’s awful!”

Standing on the basement stairs, The Three Investigators brought each other up to date telegram-style.

“We suspected you might be in trouble,” Jupiter said, “but we didn’t have Mr Bonfanti’s address. Fortunately, we knew you had been at Stars & Stiles earlier.”

“Jupiter called me just as I was about to leave work,” Mrs Stiles continued. “I overheard how important it was for your friends to find you and I became suspicious.”

“We then told Mrs Stiles about the case and that we were actually investigators,” Pete said. “She insisted on coming here with us.”

“I was Frank’s confidante and manager for decades. If someone uses Mr Giggles to do bad things, that’s my business too.”

“We met in front of the house and saw your car. When no one responded to our knock, we crept to the back and... er... opened the door.”

“With a lock pick,” Trixie added, raising an eyebrow disapprovingly. “I doubt that was allowed. Even professional investigators aren’t allowed to do that.”

Pete cleared his throat sheepishly.

“We are happy to give you detailed insights into how we work, Trixie, but now is not a good time,” Jupiter choked off the subject. “Since we have already gained access to Mr Bonfanti’s house, we should take the opportunity to find out as much as possible before he returns, preferably without leaving any traces. He doesn’t have to know we were here. We can make it look like Bob broke free on his own and made an immediate getaway. Let’s get to work, fellas. I’ll give us ten minutes, then we should leave.”

The first thing they did was look at the computers in the basement. Two of the computers were switched off. When Jupiter tried to access them, he failed to guess the correct password. However, the third was in operation, and the video was still running on it. They examined what was on the hard drive.

“Are you actually working with the police?” asked Trixie, who was standing behind them and critically observing what The Three Investigators were doing.

“Well, yeah... sort of,” Bob replied, although that was only half true. They usually involve the police when the case was solved and someone had to be arrested, but Trixie didn’t really need to know that. She had already heard more than necessary anyway.

“Then why don’t you call them and have Bryan Bonfanti arrested? After all, he locked you down here, Bob!”

“If we did that, we might cut ourselves off from solving the mystery,” Bob tried to explain, which was not always easy.

Fortunately, Jupiter steered the conversation in a different direction. “Apparently Bryan is a web designer or do something like that for a living,” he muttered. “He’s installed a lot of graphics and video programmes. I’m most interested in this one, though!” He clicked on a file called ‘Giggles’. A video started. It was a compilation of various video clips from *The Frank and Giggles Show*.

“That’s the exact wording from Vandaan’s video!” exclaimed Pete. “So it really was Bryan! That’ll add another fifty points to my investigation account.”

“Since when do we have investigation accounts?” Bob asked.

“Since this afternoon,” Jupiter clarified to Bob and opened a few more files, but found nothing more that looked related to their case.

Then he came across a camera icon and clicked on it. Another video window opened. It was divided into four smaller pictures. All four pictures showed the same house from different angles.

"These are live pictures from Spirit Grove!" shouted Bob.

"Bryan must have secretly installed cameras," Jupiter said, "which probably wasn't that difficult with all the trees around the building. He's been watching Aunt Pat's house with these! Who knows how long he's been doing it? So that's how Bryan planned his deeds! The haunting of the garden at night, the wandering of the doll and possibly the blood writing on the wall. He always knew exactly who was at home and what was going on in and around the house."

"You're probably right, Jupe," Bob said. "It is not far from here to Tuna Canyon Park. He can make it in fifteen minutes by car."

"That would solve another mystery, fellas, but the crucial question remains unanswered—what is Bryan trying to do with all this? What is it all about?"

"He wants the doll," Pete said. "The original one, not Robo-Giggles."

"But why doesn't he just take it then?" asked Bob. "After all, he would have had the opportunity dozens of times. Besides, he even owns Mr Giggles. He inherited it—and then auctioned it off to Aunt Pat!"

"Not necessarily," Jupe corrected him. "The man at CBC Studios I spoke to on the phone said the doll had been stolen. Aunt Pat said she bought it at an auction—possibly from the thief?" Jupiter looked at his watch. "But we shouldn't discuss the case here and now. Let's quickly search the rest of the house and then leave!"

The First Investigator terminated the programmes and restored the old state on the computer. Then they left the basement and split up to search the remaining rooms.

The sun had set in the meantime and there was only dim light, but they kept the lamps switched off so as not to draw attention to themselves.

In the bedroom and bathroom, Bob and Trixie found only dirty laundry.

In the kitchen, Jupiter found only dirty dishes.

Then Pete excitedly called the others into the living room. Here Bryan Bonfanti was keeping various files that had been stuffed untidily on a shelf. A few lay open on a table.

"I just rummaged around a bit," said Pete. "Find number one—your mobile phone!"

Bob wanted to take it, but Jupiter held him back. "Leave it here."

"What? But that's my phone!"

"If you take it with you, Bryan will know you've been snooping around. You'll get it back as soon as we get him arrested, Bob. I promise."

"All right," grumbled Bob, although he was not at ease.

"Find number two," Pete continued. "This!" He handed Jupiter a few documents, which he immediately skimmed.

"This is the probate of the will. It shows that Frank Corman not only left Mr Giggles to Bryan Bonfanti, but also a considerable sum of money. Also included is this letter."

To call the piece of paper a letter was very benevolent. Someone had put a few words down on paper in scrawly, shaky and slanted handwriting in blue ink:

*Dear Bryan,*

*You shall finally know the truth. Your father was not to be blamed for the injustice of that time. He was just a victim.*

*Mr Giggles knows the truth. He has seen the evidence with his own eyes. That is why he shall be yours. Seen in the right light, you will understand.*

*Forgive me! And watch out for Patricia.*

*Frank*

The Three Investigators looked at each other with wide eyes. Bob voiced what they were all thinking: “‘Watch out for Patricia’? Fellas, now it’s getting interesting!”

### 13. Aunt Pat Under Pressure

The Three Investigators were deep in thought as they cycled through the dark Tuna Canyon Park to Spirit Grove.

Half an hour ago, they had left Bryan Bonfanti's house, taking care to cover all traces. Trixie Stiles did not want to leave their side at first and wanted to know everything possible about the case, but Bob finally managed to hold her off until the next day. He promised to get back to her.

In Rocky Beach, they had switched to bicycles because they were more inconspicuous on the road and could be hidden at the side of the road more easily than a car.

"I don't understand all this," Pete broke the silence at some point. "Bryan Bonfanti was supposed to inherit Mr Giggles, but the doll had disappeared—stolen. Do you really think Aunt Pat is a thief?"

"I don't really put it past her," Bob said, "but the letter clearly says: 'Watch out for Patricia'."

"She has expended quite a bit of criminal energy before to get her hands on her hallowed Hollywood collectibles," Jupiter recalled.

"Yes, but she deeply regretted it," Pete countered.

"In any case, there must be a connection between Patricia Osborne and Frank Corman that we don't know about," Jupiter continued. "I dare say that this connection is the crucial piece of the puzzle that we are still missing."

"So what is your plan?" asked Pete.

"My plan is very simple—we confront Aunt Pat."

As if that had been the cue, the lights of Spirit Grove appeared in front of them.

"Careful now," Jupiter warned, reaching forward over the handlebars and switching off the bike lights. "We should approach the house without being caught by Bryan's surveillance cameras."

Bob and Pete also switched off their lamps and they covered the last few metres in the dark. Instead of riding up to the house, they hid their bikes a little away on the roadside and cautiously crept closer.

"Only Aunt Pat's car is parked in front of the house," Bob noted. "She seems to be alone."

"Careful!" whispered Pete, holding Bob back by the arm. "There's a camera up there!" He pointed to a spot in the branches of a tree where the faint moonlight had just been reflected in a lens.

"Well observed, Pete!" said Jupiter. "You still don't have to whisper. Those cameras don't have ears."

"The front door is off limits," Bob said. "We have to fight our way through the bushes to the back verandah to remain unseen."

The Three Investigators made their way through the trees to stay out of the camera angles. Finally they made it and stood in front of the verandah door.

Jupiter knocked.

After a while, Aunt Pat opened the door. “Well, it’s you again? I must say, you’re just as persistent as little Allie!”

“May we come in, Miss Osborne?” asked Jupiter.

For a brief moment, it looked as if Aunt Pat was going to turn them away, but fortunately she was too polite for that. “All right, come into the kitchen.”

“The kitchen is not a good place,” Jupiter said, “because it’s under camera surveillance.”

She blinked in confusion. “Excuse me?”

“You heard me right. Spirit Grove is under surveillance. There are four cameras hidden outside. One of them is pointed at the kitchen window. In fact, the entire ground floor is not secure.”

“But what are you talking about! That can’t be!”

“I’m afraid so.”

“But who should—”

“We will explain everything to you. Can we please go upstairs?”

“Yes. Yes, of course. Come on up.”

Aunt Pat let The Three Investigators into the house and led them up the stairs. There she opened the first door on the left. The boys caught only a brief glimpse of the hopeless mess of a bedroom before Aunt Pat changed her mind. “No, we’d better go next door.” She stopped in front of the next door, pulled a key out of her pocket and unlocked it.

They entered a room where there was also disorder, but disorder of a very different kind. The room was populated with mannequins in extravagant clothing—ball gowns, uniforms, nightgowns and pyjamas. They wore hats with feathers or woolly hats or wigs, sometimes matching the rest, sometimes not. Between the dolls were chairs, armchairs and several display cases in which jewellery, books, gloves, letter openers and even weapons were laid out. Up close, however, it was easy to see that the weapons were not real.

“Your collection!” said Pete, looking around in amazement. “Wow, is that really Indiana Jones’s hat?”

Aunt Pat nodded, but seemed in no mood to tell them more about the individual items. She looked very unsettled. “What do you mean Spirit Grove is being monitored, Jupiter? That’s terrible! Who would do something like that? And why? Since when? How come none of us ever noticed? It’s not possible!”

“The cameras are well hidden.”

“We have to dismantle them and switch them off immediately!” Aunt Pat exclaimed and was already halfway out of the room.

“That would only wake sleeping dogs. Later, we will explain everything to you, Miss Osborne, but first we have some questions for you.”

“What else do you want from me? Always questions, I’ve already told you everything.” Aunt Pat tried to sound annoyed, but The Three Investigators couldn’t help noticing that she was nervously playing with the hem of her colourful robe.

“We would like to know, for example, why you didn’t tell us what happened on the previous full moon night,” Jupiter said.

Aunt Pat visibly winced before suddenly devoting all her attention to plucking a sleeve on a mannequin. “The previous full moon night? What do you mean? What’s supposed to have happened then?”

“Could it be that you were looking for herbs in the forest?” Pete helped her.

She laughed. “Oh, that’s what you mean! Yes, yes, that can be, I do that every month at full moon... and at new moon too, of course. While herbs you gather at new moon have a healing effect, with full moon herbs it’s more like—”

Jupiter interrupted her sharply: "You were looking for your herbs and then you were scared to death by Mr Giggles talking to you."

Patricia Osborne turned white as a sheet. "What? How do you know about that?"

"We are investigators. We found out."

"Why didn't you tell us this story, Miss Osborne?" Bob probed further.

Aunt Pat's gaze became feverish.

"Where exactly did you buy Mr Giggles?" asked Jupiter.

She was irritated by the sudden change of subject. "Well... at an auction, of course."

"For a good cause, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"To support an orphanage?"

"Right."

"Or was it a homeless association?"

Aunt Pat hesitated for a moment. "No. An orphanage."

Jupiter's gaze darkened. "Actually, you didn't even tell us what good cause you were supposedly supporting."

"It was an orphanage!"

"Which one?"

"I don't remember that! I didn't care, to be honest. All I cared about was Mr Giggles."

"Where did the auction take place?"

"I... oh, I'll have to think about that for a minute."

"You don't remember which auction you bought Mr Giggles? That was just over a fortnight ago!"

"Oh, you know, at my age... it's easy to forget things."

"Nonsense," said Jupiter.

"Jupe!" murmured Pete, poking him lightly in the side. He thought the First Investigator was being too hard on Aunt Pat.

However, Jupiter did not see it that way. Patricia Osborne was obviously lying and had put Bob, among others, in great danger with her untruths. Jupe no longer wanted to be led around by the nose.

"You're lying," the First Investigator said with narrowed eyes. "You've been lying from the beginning. You stole the doll, didn't you?"

"I didn't!" cried Aunt Pat indignantly, but then she lost her composure and burst into unrestrained sobs. "I didn't!" she whimpered. "It's not my fault! I didn't deserve this! I'm not the bad one after all! What am I supposed to do?"

She dropped into Marlon Brando's chair, buried her face in her hands and cried.

## 14. An Outrage!

“Goodness,” Pete murmured helplessly and handed Aunt Pat a handkerchief. “Here... please calm down.”

It took a few minutes for Patricia Osborne to compose herself enough to speak again. Her eyes and nose were red, but she had stopped crying and shaking. “I’m sorry. I can see that you only mean well... and, yes, I didn’t tell you the truth.”

“Then do it now,” Bob asked.

She nodded and looked at the handkerchief in her hands. “I didn’t steal Mr Giggles. I paid for him. Two thousand three hundred dollars—a huge chunk of my savings. The guy literally cleaned me out.”

Jupiter listened up. “What guy?”

“The guy who sold me Mr Giggles.”

“Who was that?”

“His name is Steve Johnson and he works at CBC Studios. He’s the son of a friend. We don’t know each other well but after I read in the papers that Frank Corman had died, I called him and asked what was going to happen to Mr Giggles, and would he be auctioned off. He said he couldn’t imagine that, but wanted to help me anyway. Then one day he was standing at my door with Mr Giggles in his arms. ‘For three thousand dollars you can have him,’ he said.” Barely audible, she added: “I was able to bargain him down to two thousand three hundred.”

Jupiter cleared his throat audibly. “You knew he had stolen the doll.”

“No! Of course not! Where from!”

“Please, Miss Osborne... at least you could guess.”

“Well... but I didn’t know for sure!”

“Now I’m not surprised that you weren’t very enthusiastic about our offer to investigate the case.” Jupiter sighed. “All right. Now what was it about the night of the full moon? What exactly happened there?” The Three Investigators knew, but it couldn’t hurt to hear the story from Aunt Pat herself.

“I was looking for herbs in the forest. When I returned to the garden, I suddenly saw Mr Giggles on the stone and he spoke to me. He moved all by himself! I was scared to death! He explained to me that he was really Frank... and that he would not rest unless I admitted everything and told the truth. Then I fled into the house... into this room, because I could lock myself in here. When I turned around, there was Mr Giggles, sitting on this very armchair, grinning at me.”

A shiver ran down Pete’s spine as he imagined the scene. He probably wouldn’t have been able to sleep for fear from that moment on. Then he remembered that it had happened exactly the same way to Aunt Pat.

“But he didn’t speak anymore,” Jupiter speculated, “and didn’t move either.”

“Yes... I mean, yes, he did not speak anymore. He didn’t have to... as I had understood the message. Frank’s ghost had taken possession of the doll and demanded that I turn myself in. Although, when you think about it, that’s an outrage.”

Pete had to suppress a laugh. “An outrage?”

“Yes! Think about it! Why is Frank Corman’s ghost after me and not Steve Johnson? I didn’t steal the doll, he did! I even paid a lot of money for Mr Giggles! Yet now I’m being hounded for it.” By now she had looked up from her handkerchief and a defiant expression had entered her eyes. “I don’t think that’s fair.”

The Three Investigators were speechless.

“However, I now have a theory as to why Frank Corman’s ghost is haunting me and not Steve Johnson,” Aunt Pat continued unapologetically. “It’s because of Mr Giggles. The ghost can only manifest itself in the doll because it has always been near Frank... and the doll is with me now. That must be the reason. Don’t you think so?”

Jupiter decided not to answer that. “So, instead of giving in to Mr Giggles’s demands, you tried spirit conjuring instead.”

“No, not spirit conjuring... but with banishing and protective rituals. I have scattered salt circles and set up candles and dressed myself in purple... because purple offers protection, you must know that.”

“Heard that one before,” Bob muttered, rolling his eyes inwardly.

“I wanted to drive Frank Corman’s ghost away. He shouldn’t care less who owns Mr Giggles now. He’s dead, after all!”

“But it was all to no avail,” Jupiter reminded her. “Mr Giggles continued to haunt. Every day he wandered around the house as if by magic. Did it really occur to you that the haunting might not be real at all, but man-made?”

Aunt Pat lowered her eyes again. Her suddenly flared fighting spirit had faded. “Well, the wandering thing...” Her voice died away.

“What about it?” Jupiter enquired.

“It’s not entirely true.”

Bob frowned. “What are you saying?”

“Mr Giggles didn’t wander around...” she confessed tonelessly. “I myself put him somewhere else every day so that Sunshine and Vandaan would help me with the protection spells. It’s not like I could tell them the truth about the full moon night. Then they would have found out how... I acquired Mr Giggles. They would have tried to persuade me to give him back! So I... made something up... to make them believe me that the doll was possessed, but not know why.”

Pete laughed out loud. Bob threw his hands up to the sky and started pacing.

Jupiter stared darkly at the woman. “Are you serious?”

“It was a white lie!” Aunt Pat defended herself. “I needed mental and spiritual support. A banishing ritual like that is much more powerful when you do it with four people. It’s a sacred number. That’s why I was so happy that we met Osiris. I really thought everything was going to be okay.”

Jupiter shook his head in bewilderment. “What about the blood writing? Were you responsible for that too?”

“No! How was I supposed to accomplish that? The blood writing was the second real warning from Frank Corman’s ghost.”

The First Investigator sighed deeply. “All right, Miss Osborne. I see some things much more clearly now... but I have to ask you, is that really all there is to it? Or if there’s more you want to confess to us.”

“Really, Jupiter! What do you take me for! You think that I’m a fraud or an impostor or something like that. Frank Corman’s ghost is the evil one, not me! He’s a lost soul who wants to take pointless revenge instead of crossing the threshold to the next world. I’m just helping him find the right path.”



Again Jupiter had to sigh. He just couldn't help it. "Miss Osborne, we have evidence of what really happened and it has nothing to do with Frank Corman's ghost. It was not a ghost that haunted Mr Giggles. It was an entirely different doll that spoke to you in the garden on the night of the full moon. Since you are a fan of *The Frank and Giggles Show*, you may even know it. That was Robo-Giggles at your garden."

Aunt Pat turned pale. "The mechanical doll? From the Christmas special?"

"The very one," Pete confirmed, "and what it said was edited together from old show recordings."

"It can't be!"

"Yes, Robo-Giggles was at the CBC Studios. He was passed on to the man who is actually entitled to the original Mr Giggles, because Frank Corman bequeathed him the puppet. This man has been monitoring Spirit Grove with cameras ever since, presumably to find out when he can stage his haunted performances. We also suspect him to be behind the blood writing." Jupiter paused dramatically, watching Aunt Pat closely as he said: "Bryan Bonfanti."

However, Patricia Osborne only blinked at him in confusion, and this time Jupiter didn't think she was fooling them.

"Bryan who?" she asked. "Who's that supposed to be?"

## 15. "Hello, it's Mr Giggles Again!"

"Bryan Bonfanti," Bob now said. "The circus owner's son."

"What circus owner?" asked Aunt Pat. "I don't know what you're talking about at all."

"But you must know him," Pete was convinced. "After all, he is the one who has terrified you."

Aunt Pat only looked at The Three Investigators helplessly. "Who is this person? Why is he doing this?"

Jupiter's gaze darkened and he began to pinch his lower lip thoughtfully. "We were hoping you could tell us. We do know who he is, but as to his motives, we are completely in the dark. There must be a connection between you and him, otherwise—" Jupe fell silent as he heard footsteps on the stairs.

"That will be Vandaan," Aunt Pat guessed, glancing at her watch. "He's late today. Wait a minute, I'll quickly tell him you're here or he'll wonder if I'm talking to myself."

Aunt Pat left the room and The Three Investigators had a chance to confer.

"Do you think she really doesn't know Bryan?" asked Bob.

"Maybe she knows him by another name," Pete pondered. "They must have some kind of history together otherwise—"

A scream rang through the house.

"That was Aunt Pat!" Pete shouted and immediately rushed to the ajar door. It slammed shut before he reached it. He could still hear the key being turned from outside. Desperately he jiggled the knob, but the door would not open.

"Miss Osborne! Open up!"

A stifled groan came through the door, then footsteps rumbled down the stairs.

"Miss Osborne!! Answer me!"

The footsteps faded away somewhere in the house until silence reigned again.

"Someone overpowered her," Jupiter shouted.

"Bryan Bonfanti," Bob guessed, "and it's our fault. He must have thought Aunt Pat was alone, since we made sure that he couldn't see us on his surveillance cameras. Had he saw us, he might not have dared to come here."

Pete nodded. "Then he heard us talking here, went up the stairs, saw the key stuck in the door and bang!"

"Unfortunately the window has bars," Jupiter noted, "because Aunt Pat wants to protect her collection."

"We don't need a window," Pete said. "We just need this." He pulled his lock pick set out of his pocket and immediately set to work. "Bummer, the key is stuck from the other side. I'll have to push it out first. Does anyone have any chewing gum?"

"Ah!" said Bob, who immediately understood what Pete was getting at. "The good old gum trick! I think I've got some!"

He produced an almost empty packet from his pocket. Pete put a strip in his mouth and began to chew furiously. Then he took out the sticky lump and put it on the tip of an appropriate lock pick. He pushed it into the keyhole. The chewing gum stuck to the tip of the inserted key. Now he could turn it and push it out of the keyhole. On the other side, the key

fell to the floor with a jingle and that cleared the way for Pete's lock pick. A minute later, the Second Investigator had opened the door.

Quietly they hurried to the stairs. Pete peered through a narrow skylight into the garden. "There's a fire outside!"

"Go down quietly!" admonished Jupiter. "Bryan doesn't need to know we've broken free."

They crept down to the ground floor and cautiously looked outside through the panes of the verandah door.

Flames were flickering again where the fire had burned the night before. Aunt Pat was tied up on a chair next to it. Her head had fallen forward, and her eyes were closed as if she was unconscious. In front of her on the large stone sat Mr Giggles.

"She has fainted!" said Pete, startled. "We have to help her!"

"Not so fast, Pete!" Jupiter held him back. "Aunt Pat is in no immediate danger. I'm sure she'll come round soon. I want to know what happens then."

"What happens then? Mr Giggles is there!"

"Who, as we all know, is merely a doll and cannot harm her," Jupiter reminded. "Just pay attention!"

Aunt Pat slowly raised her head. Confused, she looked around and then noticed that she was tied up. She tried to free herself but failed.

"Help!" she gasped fearfully. Then she screamed at the top of her lungs: "Help!"

"We have to do something, Jupe!" said Bob firmly. He knew only too well how Aunt Pat was feeling right now, after all, he himself had been in a similar situation only a few hours ago. "We can't do it like this, we have to free her!"

"No," Jupiter objected.

"Jupiter! Pete! Bob!" cried Aunt Pat. "Help me!"

"But—" Bob began.

"I feel sorry for her too, Bob, but we won't get any closer to identify the perpetrator if we interfere now. We have to keep a clear head. We'll wait!"

Bob found the situation unbearable. He almost overrode Jupiter, when suddenly Mr Giggles came to life. The doll spread its arms and turned its head in Aunt Pat's direction. It raised its eyebrows, opened its mouth and called out: "Hello, it's Mr Giggles again!"

Aunt Pat froze and looked at the doll with widened eyes. "Hello Mr Giggles," she breathed so softly that it was barely audible over the crackling of the fire.

"I won't rest until the truth comes out, hee hee hee!" the doll asked.

"What truth?"

"What have you done? Tell me!"

"I don't know what you mean. I want to be cut loose. Please!"

"What have you done?" repeated Mr Giggles. "Tell me! Otherwise I won't let you go!"

"I don't know what you're talking about, Mr Giggles!"

"What have you done? Tell me! Otherwise I won't let you go! What have you done? Tell me!"

Patricia Osborne shook her bonds desperately.

"Tell me! Tell me! Tell me! Tell me! Tell me!"

Aunt Pat seemed to realize that she was no match for the restraints and gave up trying. She straightened her shoulders as much as possible and looked Mr Giggles in the eye.

"Tell me! Tell me! Tell me!"

"All right, I'll tell you."

Mr Giggles was silent and raised his eyebrows expectantly.

“Pay attention, Mr Giggles...” Aunt Pat began. “You are annoying.”

Mr Giggles stopped moving.

“Yeah, you’re amazed, aren’t you? You’re really annoying me. I know you’re not really Mr Giggles. You’re not Frank Corman’s ghost either, although I have long believed that. You’re just a remote-controlled puppet—Robo-Giggles. The original Mr Giggles is in the broom cupboard.”

“Tell me!” Mr Giggles tried again.

“And your voice is just made up of old video clips,” Aunt Pat added calmly. “That’s why you can’t say anything else. That’s why you are annoying me.”

Mr Giggles stared at her motionlessly and remained silent. Then all at once he lost all body tension and slumped down like a marionette whose strings had been cut.

A figure detached itself from the darkness and stepped into the flickering fire light. The man held a remote control in his hand. He carelessly dropped it on the grass and stepped towards Aunt Pat with a scowl. “You think you’re smart, don’t you?” said Bryan Bonfanti.

“Oh, I didn’t find that out. The Three Investigators told me.”

“Who?”

“The three boys. What have you done with them?”

“Oh, your accomplices! Don’t worry, they’re locked upstairs and won’t disturb us during our little chat.”

“Who are you?”

He hesitated only briefly before saying: “My name is Bryan Bonfanti.”

“I don’t know you and I haven’t done anything to you. Untie me! This is deprivation of liberty!”

He laughed. “You don’t know me, but you know my father—Antonio Bonfanti.”

“I don’t know him either.”

“You are lying. Tell the truth now! What did you do to him?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about at all, Mr Bonfanti.”

“Enough!” thundered Bryan, stepping menacingly towards Aunt Pat. “You stole the doll! Because you knew it held a secret that should never come to light! Tell the truth now!”

Bryan was so intimidating that Aunt Pat’s courage quickly evaporated. “But I don’t know what you mean!” she said pleadingly. “I’m just a collector! I wanted Mr Giggles, it’s true, but otherwise—”

“Stop playing games! I have believed all my life that my father was responsible for the end of the Bonfanti Circus and the death of three people—including himself. For three weeks now, I have known that this is not the truth. Frank Corman confided in me in a letter, and he warned me about you.”

He walked even closer to her, finally putting his hands on the back of the chair and leaning over her threateningly. “But now it’s my turn. Tell me what really happened then!” As he leaned over her, his T-shirt slid up his back a little. The Three Investigators saw a gun stuck in the back waistband of his trousers.

“Jupe!” gasped Pete. “He’s got a gun! We have to do something, and we have to do it now!”

“I agree,” Jupiter said. “We’ll intervene before he gets any ideas.”

Determined, he reached for the doorknob, but the door was locked. Reflexively, he pulled harder. The door creaked in the frame. Bryan Bonfanti, alerted by the noise, looked up. Their eyes met through the glass.

## 16. "Seen With His Own Eyes"

"Bummer!" Jupiter hissed and rattled the door again, which of course did nothing.

"Jupe, he saw us!" shouted Bob.

Pete's eyes snapped open. "He's reaching for his gun!"

What happened next happened so quickly that The Three Investigators hardly noticed.

Out of nowhere, someone stepped into the fire light behind Bryan's back, lashed out with a thick branch and sent it hurtling down onto Bryan's wrist.

Bryan cried out in shock and pain and dropped the gun. He went to the ground and held his arm.

The attacker reared up above him and raised the branch again, but Bryan, while still trembling, managed to look up at the attacker in time. "You!" he exclaimed.

"It's Trixie Stiles!" shouted Bob. "Quick, Pete, open the door, we have to help her!"

Bob had thought of Pete's lock picks, but the Second Investigator pulled his right leg and kicked the door with all his might. The lock broke out of the wood and the door flew open.

The Three Investigators rushed outside towards Bryan. He was about to pick himself up and reach for the gun, but Trixie Stiles stepped on his hand and picked up the gun herself.

Finally, the boys were there too. Together they grabbed Bryan and held him on the ground. Because of his injured wrist, he could hardly defend himself, but he cursed all the louder. "Let go of me, you brats!"

"That might suit you!" growled Bob, while Jupiter freed Aunt Pat.

Finally they dragged Bryan to his feet and pushed him down on the chair with gentle force. He had stopped resisting. As they clearly outnumbered him, they refrained from tying him up.

"Mrs Stiles, what are you doing here?" asked Bob.

"Saving you," she said with a grin.

"But how—"

"The whole story gave me no peace. So after you left, I stayed near Bryan's house in my car and waited for him. I wanted to know what he would do when he saw that his prisoner had escaped. He came half an hour later and went into the house. Shortly afterwards he stormed out again, jumped into his car and drove off. I followed him. Luckily he didn't notice me."

"Thank you, my dear," Aunt Pat breathed, and then suddenly swayed. Bob and Pete hurried to her. "It was all a bit much," she murmured. "I need to sit down for a moment."

"Wait, I'll take you to the verandah and get you a glass of water," Mrs Stiles offered her help and escorted Aunt Pat towards the house.

Now The Three Investigators were alone with Bryan Bonfanti.

"You won't get away with this!" said Bryan, glaring at the boys one by one. The flickering fire was reflected in his eyes.

Pete laughed out. "We can't get away with this? You're the one who locked us up and assaulted and threatened Miss Osborne!"

"And you kept me in your basement," Bob added.

"After you broke into my house," Bryan retaliated. "In any case, she's a criminal!" He glanced towards Patricia Osborne.

"What did she do?" Jupiter wanted to know.

"As if you didn't know! After all, you are her accomplices!"

"We are investigators taking on the case of a haunted ventriloquist's dummy, that's all," Jupiter corrected him.

"Investigators!" sneered Bryan, obviously not believing a word.

However, Jupiter did not let himself be put off. "That's right, and we found out that you were behind the haunting."

"She stole the doll!"

"That's not quite correct."

"All right, Steve Johnson did it," Bryan said, "but he did it on her behalf!"

"That's not true!" exclaimed Aunt Pat from the verandah, taking a sip of water that Trixie just handed her. "He offered it to me!"

"So you were informed of the doll's whereabouts by Steve Johnson," Jupiter surmised.

Bryan nodded. "He blabbed when I was at CBC Studios trying to track down the doll—my doll. I had a go at him. That's when he blabbed the whole story."

"But why all this fuss?" asked Pete, full of incomprehension, pointing at the motionless Robo-Giggles. "Why were you monitoring Miss Osborne with cameras and putting on all this? That was you too with the blood writing, wasn't it?"

"Yes. I saw what she was doing here in the garden and came to the conclusion that I needed to be a little more explicit."

"So you took advantage of the opportunity when no one was inside the house," Bob continued, "but why didn't you just confront Miss Osborne? Or called the police? Or just taken the doll with you? It's yours!"

"I don't give a damn about the doll!" cried Bryan angrily. "It's about the secret that's inside it! She wants to destroy the evidence in the doll!" Accusingly, he looked at Patricia Osborne again.

"What am I supposed to have done?" cried Aunt Pat from the verandah. "I don't know anything about a secret! Jupiter, it's not true what that man is saying. What does he actually want from me?"

"Mr Bonfanti?" Jupiter turned to Bryan questioningly.

Now it just bubbled out of Bryan: "Frank Corman let me know that the circus accident back then had happened quite differently than everyone thought. In the last weeks of his life, he called me a few times, but he just hinted and uttered things that confused me. Then he died and I got his letter. It says more or less clearly that there is evidence of what really happened back then, and that this evidence is in the doll."

"We know the letter," Jupiter enlightened him. "It doesn't say that evidence is hidden in the doll. It merely says that Mr Giggles has seen the evidence with his own eyes."

"It can only be meant that way! Besides, Frank warned me about Patricia!"

"But Miss Osborne claims never to have heard of you or your father," Jupiter said.

"Because she's a liar."

Then Bob suggested: "Let's just go and see what's in Mr Giggles, the original one, of course—the one in the broom closet."

"I did that a long time ago!" Bryan angrily huffed. "It was the first thing I did after I tracked down Patricia Osborne a fortnight ago. I got into this house when no one was there, found the doll and examined it from top to bottom, but there was nothing there. I'm sure she destroyed the evidence."

"I didn't destroy anything," Miss Osborne argued. "I still don't know what you are talking about!"

Jupiter frowned. "Then you considered making Mr Giggles haunted using the second doll you got as a replacement from CBC Studios—to get Miss Osborne to tell the truth and make a confession."

"It was the only thing I could do," Bryan rumbled.

"Making Mr Giggles haunted?" asked Bob doubtfully. "How did you come up with that?"

"Because that lunatic there believes in this humbug!" shouted Bryan. "You can see that as soon as you enter the house! Somehow, she didn't confess anything, nor has she tried to escape or in any way get her head out of the noose. I watched her for a week. She didn't do anything except hold that ridiculous séance."

"You are the lunatic! That wasn't a séance, it was a banishing ritual!" exclaimed Aunt Pat. "And are you deaf? Didn't you hear me say that I don't know what you're talking about at all?"

"We'll go and check out Mr Giggles now," Jupiter decided. "Even if you and Pete have already done so, six people see more than two."

At a nod from Juve, Pete went into the house to the broom closet, opened the door and switched on the light. Mr Giggles's green eyes twinkled at him mockingly and his mouth dropped open.

"You're about to wipe that grin off your face, because now we're going to take you apart," Pete said, grabbed the doll and went outside with it.

For the next half hour, The Three Investigators examined Mr Giggles from all sides. They removed his clothes and scrutinized every square inch of fabric. They carefully pulled off the glued-on hair and pressed for minutes on the arms, legs and belly to feel if there was anything inside the doll. Then Bob felt around inside the head, followed by Jupiter, and finally Pete again, although he had already done that in the afternoon. Mr Giggles rolled his eyes wildly, raised and lowered his eyebrows, and opened and closed his mouth incessantly as The Three Investigators carefully inspected the mechanics. However, they found nothing.

"So now what?" asked Pete, perplexed.

"We need to focus on the eyes," Bob said. "Mr Giggles has seen the evidence with his own eyes!"

"But we've already examined the eyes!" Pete countered. "There's nothing there!"

"Maybe from the inside."

"Then we would have to take the head apart," Jupiter said.

"Out of the question!" protested Aunt Pat.

"I'm afraid we have no choice, Miss Osborne, otherwise we will never solve the mystery. I promise you I will be careful and put the head back together afterwards. I have experience in such matters. I've done many of such things for my uncle—"

"No," said Aunt Pat firmly. "You'll only break it!"

"You see?" exclaimed Bryan. "She has something to hide!"

"Miss Osborne, do you have a flashlight?"

She nodded. "In the broom closet."

Pete quickly found it and handed it to the First Investigator. "What are you going to do?"

"I want to shine a light into the head. Maybe we can see something we can't feel—some writing or something."

Bob and Pete held the doll upside down while Jupiter shone into the inside of the head. It was not easy to see anything this way. After the First Investigator had stuck the flashlight

directly into the head, it was bright inside, but now the flashlight itself was in the way.

“Now his eyes are glowing from the inside,” Pete murmured. “Looks pretty creepy, don’t you think?”

“Oh, enough with your ‘creepy’ remarks,” Jupiter said. He was annoyed because he didn’t know how to examine the inside of the head.

The Second Investigator was miffed. He averted his eyes from Mr Giggles’s face and looked instead at the two specks of light cast from the glass eyes on the wall. He frowned. The spots were blurred because the light was refracted by the glass, but there was more—blurred lines that, if he squinted his eyes, it almost looked like—

“Words! Fellas! There’s something in Mr Giggles’s eyes! The light is throwing it on the wall like a projector! There’s... there’s a secret message!”



## 17. Patricia Who?

Everyone stared at the wall as if spellbound.

“There really is something!” murmured Bryan. “I didn’t see that when I examined the doll!”

“We all didn’t see it,” Jupiter said. Together they now tried to find the right distance to the wall so that the writing would be sharp.

“There are two documents or something,” muttered the First Investigator, “one in each eye. Frank Corman must have made two miniature slides or something like that and then put them in the glass eyes. That must have been complicated.”

“I couldn’t care less how he did it,” Pete said impatiently. “I want to read it now! Why don’t you stop wiggling, Bob, you’ll never get it sharp like that, and besides, the writing is the wrong way round. We’ll have to turn it over.”

Finally, Mr Giggles sat on a chair on the verandah and stared at the wall with shining eyes. On the cracked wood, the two pieces of writing now stood out reasonably sharply.

“On the left we have an invitation addressed to CBC Studios,” Jupiter said and read out:

*Dear Mr Fernandez,*

*As we discussed on the phone, I would be very pleased to welcome you and your colleagues to the last performance of the Bonfanti Circus in Los Angeles before we move on. I can promise you that you will not be disappointed and I recommend that you specifically see our ventriloquist Frank Corman. He could be just the talent you are looking for. See you then!*

*Yours sincerely...*

“... And then some scribble for a signature.” Then the First Investigator turned to the second document. “This is not a letter,” he observed. “It’s an order from the Los Angeles Police Department stating that that night’s performance by the Bonfanti Circus must be cancelled due to a severe weather warning.”

“Look at the date at the top right!” said Bob. “That was the day of the disaster—when the tent collapsed in the storm.”

“There are two signatures at the bottom,” Pete noted. “One from the police official who wrote it, and the second by the person who acknowledged the receipt. It’s the same scribble as on the invitation on the left—so the circus owner Mr Bonfanti’s, I suppose.” He looked at Bryan. “Are those your father’s writing?”

“That is not my father’s signature or writing,” Bryan objected.

“Anyway, the scribble actually doesn’t look like it said ‘Bonfanti’,” Bob agreed with the man.

“There is a return address on the top of the letter to Mr Fernandez,” Jupiter noted, “but the edge is a bit blurred. Wait a minute, we’ll have that in a moment...” He moved Mr Giggles a few centimetres further forward and the sender’s name became legible.

“Patricia Hill,” Pete read aloud, his eyes widening. “Patricia! Here she is at last!” He turned to Miss Osborne.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” asked Aunt Pat innocently. “My name is Osborne, not Hill. You know that... and it’s always been Osborne. I’ve never been married, and have never changed my name. There are many Patricias in the world. The name is not that unusual.”

“I can see that now,” Jupiter said and all at once a light came on and he slapped his forehead. “We are so stupid, fellas! ‘Watch out for Patricia’—that referred to a very different Patricia! Not Patricia Osborne, but Patricia Hill!”

“Then the name similarity was just a coincidence?” Pete wondered.

“Looks like it, Pete.”

“So who is Patricia Hill?” Pete continued.

“I have no idea,” Jupe replied.

“But I do,” Bob said.

Everyone turned to look at Bob. Only he had noticed that Trixie Stiles had been eyeing him furtively for half a minute. He looked into her eyes and said: “You are Patricia Hill.”

“What?” cried Pete.

“There’s an old newspaper photo of you hanging in your office,” Bob continued. “Underneath it says: ‘Trixie Hill’—your maiden name. ‘Trixie’ is short for Patricia.”

“Is that right?” asked Jupiter.

Mrs Stiles looked blankly at the First Investigator and remained silent. It was unfathomable what was going on inside her.

“But... but I don’t understand,” Pete said, confused. “What does that mean now? If she is the Patricia that Frank warned about... why did he warn about her?”

“It’s about the circus disaster,” said Bob, who had just remembered something Mrs Stiles had said to him that afternoon. “Mrs Stiles, you claimed that the owner had thrown caution to the wind at the time, let the show go ahead despite the storm, and no one else knew about it.”

“That’s what everyone said,” Bryan spoke up. “Everyone blamed my father for the accident. They all said he risked the lives of the circus people and the audience so he wouldn’t have to give up the evening’s takings.”

“But it’s not true that nobody knew about it,” Bob continued. “This document proves it. Patricia Hill signed the police order to acknowledge it. She knew about it!”

“Of course!” exclaimed Jupiter. “And now I realize why! You had invited Mr Fernandez from CBC Studios because you knew the station was looking for new talent. You wanted him to watch Frank Corman’s act because you were convinced he would be discovered. It was the last show of the Bonfanti Circus in Los Angeles, so it had to go on. That’s why you ignored the police order. You didn’t even pass it on to the owner, did you?”

Trixie’s face took on a desperate expression. Jupiter seemed to have hit the mark with all his assumptions.

Then she said: “Frank pushed me into it! He had tracked down these people at CBC Studios. He wanted to get out of the circus and appear before Mr Fernandez and his colleagues at any cost. He asked me to write this invitation. When the police came at noon and asked us to cancel the performance, as the manager, I was the one who spoke to the policemen. I told Frank that the performance was not allowed to take place, but he kept talking to me until—” She fell silent.

“Until you disregarded the police order and concealed it from the owner,” Jupiter finished the thought. “Now, it’s clear that Mr Bonfanti didn’t know about the danger. That’s why he didn’t cancel the performance.”

Bryan took a few steps towards Trixie threateningly, but then Jupiter held him back.  
“Please, Bryan, calm down.”

Bryan Bonfanti was trembling with rage. “I’ve always believed that my father was an irresponsible monster, but he wasn’t. You put the blame on him—to get your own head out of the noose! Just so that Frank Corman could appear on television!”

“Nobody could have known that the storm would be so bad,” Trixie Stiles defended herself.

“The police suspected it,” Jupiter countered, “and we will notify them now. I’m sure they will still be interested in this case after all this time, especially when people have died. Bob, would you please call Inspector Cotta?”

“My mobile phone is still in Bryan’s house,” he reminded the First Investigator.

“You can use the phone in the house,” Aunt Pat offered.

Bob was about to go in when Trixie’s face contorted. “No,” she said coldly. “Nobody calls the police!”

She raised the gun she had taken from Bryan earlier and waved it once around.  
“Everyone stay where you are!”

“Trixie,” Bob said calmly, “it’s no use.” He took a step towards her, but she pointed the gun at him and clutched it tightly with both hands.

“No!” she cried. “You’re not ruining my life! Go and get the doll!”

Bob blinked in irritation.

“The doll!” repeated Trixie louder. “Do you hear me? Go and get it now!”

Trixie no longer seemed to be able to control herself and Bob began to feel afraid. He obediently took Mr Giggles. The flashlight fell out and the light in the doll’s eyes went out.

“Throw it in the fire!” said Trixie, directing him down from the verandah with the gun.

“What are you up to, Trixie?” Bob asked.

“Go!”

Bob walked towards the campfire with Mr Giggles in his hands.

“Throw it in the fire!” Trixie instructed him again.

“Why do you want me to do this?” Bob argued.

“Stop talking and throw the doll in the fire!”

## 18. A Dark Cloud of Deceit

Quick as a flash, Bob played through all the possibilities. He could refuse, but at the moment, he thought Trixie was unpredictable. She was capable of anything. However, if he did what she asked of him, not only would Mr Giggles be destroyed, but the evidence that was inside would be gone. Then suddenly, he had an idea.

Instead of throwing the puppet into the fire, Bob slowly turned to face Trixie. Then he held Mr Giggles up to face her as well. The doll's mouth flipped open at just the right moment, and it said: "Hello, it's Mr Giggles again!"

Trixie Stiles widened her eyes. Sheer fear came to her face. Trembling, she lowered the gun, then turned around and ran.

"Stop right there!" Bryan Bonfanti shouted and wanted to go after her, but Jupiter held him by the arm.

"Be reasonable, Mr Bonfanti. She has a gun and feels cornered."

"But we can't just let her leave!"

By then they heard the roar of an engine.

"Jupe, she's escaping!" cried Pete. "What do we do now?"

The next moment, they heard tyres squealed followed by a loud bang.

"Something's happened!" Jupe exclaimed and The Three Investigators immediately ran around the house to the street.

Trixie Stiles's car had crashed into another vehicle as she was leaving the driveway. There was hissing and smoke under the bonnet.

"That's Sunshine's car!" Pete rushed to the cars. Mrs Stiles had hit her forehead against the steering wheel on impact and was moaning in a daze.

Quick as a flash, the Second Investigator yanked open the passenger door and took the gun that lay on the seat. "There," he said with relief. "Danger averted!"

At that moment, Bryan and Aunt Pat also came running, and Sunshine got out of her car. "What's going on here?" she shouted indignantly.

When Inspector Cotta arrived twenty minutes later, he had Jupiter explain what had happened. This took a while, but finally Trixie Stiles was arrested and taken away. The Three Investigators promised to go to the police station the next day and put their statements on record. Only after the police officers had gone did a little peace return to Spirit Grove.

Exhausted, The Three Investigators, Aunt Pat, Bryan Bonfanti and Sunshine sat down on the verandah and talked about the events of the last few hours. Sunshine listened in amazement and bewilderment while Aunt Pat slowly calmed down.

Only Bryan Bonfanti sat there with his shoulders drooping. Finally, he said: "I owe you an apology, Miss Osborne. I was convinced that you were the culprit. My behaviour was—"

"Outrageous," Aunt Pat suggested. "Yes, it was."

"You, however..." Bryan continued timidly, "anyway, you took the doll—"

"You can't compare to that at all!" Aunt Pat immediately defended herself, but it was more of a reflex because afterwards, she lowered her eyes in shame.

"I'll make you a deal, Miss Osborne," Bryan said. "We'll go to Steve Johnson together and get your money back from him... and I'll give you Mr Giggles. I don't care about that doll. In return, you will forgive me."

Beaming, Aunt Pat raised her head. "Oh, that would be wonderful!" She held out her hand to him. "Deal!"

"Then that's settled," said Pete, "but what do you think will happen to Trixie now?"

"That will have to be decided by the police or a judge," Jupiter said.

"After all, she claimed it was all Frank's fault," Bob recalled, "that it was his idea to keep the police order from Mr Bonfanti. Do you think that's true?"

Jupiter pinched briefly at his lower lip. "No. I don't think so... because then Frank would have destroyed the two pieces of evidences that finally brought the truth to light, instead of hiding slides of them in Mr Giggles's eyes. In fact, this action only makes sense if it was the other way around.

"Trixie was the driving force at the time. She had invited Mr Fernandez from CBC Studios because she wanted Frank to make a career in television. After all, they were a couple for some time. She probably destroyed the evidences after the accident, but Frank had made slides of them beforehand. You only do that if you are aware of your guilt and want to make sure that the truth might come out one day. He was plagued by a guilty conscience all his life, which was why he regularly sent you money, Bryan. However, he was also too cowardly to tell the truth, because that would have resulted in a trial and his career would have been over."

"But if it was Trixie—why didn't she just throw me off the scent this afternoon?" asked Bob.

"Because she had no idea that the evidences even existed. She only got the idea a few hours ago at Bryan's house. That's why she followed him here—to stop this old story from blowing up in her face... which has now happened anyway."

The roar of a diesel engine approached.

"That's Vandaan's old van," Sunshine said. "You can always hear it rattling through the canyon from a distance. He'll be wide-eyed when he hears what he missed."

But Vandaan apparently had important news of his own, because he stormed towards Aunt Pat without paying any attention to the others present. "Patricia! Osiris is on his way here! And he's an impostor!"

"Osiris?" asked Aunt Pat, as if she had completely forgotten who that was in the first place.

"Yes, I've been shadowing him all day today. You can't believe a word he says!"

"You continued to shadow him?" asked Pete in amazement. "After we were in his apartment?"

"Oh, hello Pete."

"Vandaan, you were in his apartment?" Aunt Pat asked.

"Yes," Vandaan replied impatiently, "but it doesn't matter now because—"

He didn't get any further because by then, they heard another car pull into the driveway.

"Quick, into the house!" murmured Jupiter. "Otherwise he'll get suspicious right away! You too, Bryan!"

Bryan did not know what was going on, but he willingly followed The Three Investigators. They scurried into the house through the verandah door just at the second Osiris entered the garden. Through the window they could observe everything.

"Patricia!" cried Osiris. "Sunshine, Vandaan! I'm glad you're here. Sorry to show up here unannounced like this, but I need to talk to you!"

“Osiris!” Aunt Pat pretended to be surprised. “You have returned! What’s wrong?”

“I was right with my fears yesterday. The powers we summoned... they have not returned to their dimension. I have very fine senses for that. We have only made it worse. I’m afraid the doll is now possessed by several evil spirits at once. They have tried to contact me as I can feel their presence very clearly. They will not leave willingly. We must try a new banishing spell—a stronger one this time!”

Aunt Pat closed her eyes and rubbed her temples. “Yes, Osiris, you’re right,” she murmured. “I feel it too. There’s a dark shadow.”

“You felt it?” Osiris asked.

“Yes. It surrounds you, it almost envelops you like a cloud. Wait... I can connect to this cloud. It’s... it’s a dark cloud of deceit and it permeates you completely!” She opened her eyes and smiled. “This must really be torture for you, but I’m afraid we can’t help you there. No magical ritual can stand against such deceit.”

Osiris stared at her. “Uh... but...”

Her gaze turned icy cold. “Leave this property, Osiris! And don’t you dare show your face here again!”

“But...”

Vandaan stood up. “You heard what Patricia said. Get lost in your own dimension!”

With that, Osiris stormed off.

When The Three Investigators stepped back out onto the verandah, they could hardly contain their laughter.

“Miss Osborne!” exclaimed Pete enthusiastically. “That was great!”

“Oh,” she said, waving it off sheepishly. “After all, I’ve had a few moments to think about what I’m saying—thanks to Vandaan’s warning.” She smiled at him. “Thanks for scaring him off.”

Vandaan turned bright red for everyone to see.

Only Aunt Pat pretended not to notice. She pushed herself out of her chair. “So, now I urgently need a cup of herbal tea. I gathered these herbs when the crescent moon was waning, so it enhances the calming effect. Would anyone else like some?”